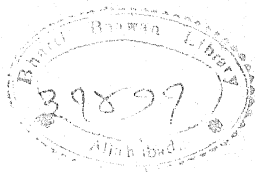


THE ILLUSIVE FLAME

BY

A. MACLEAN

AUTHOR OF "PAMELA BY PROXY"

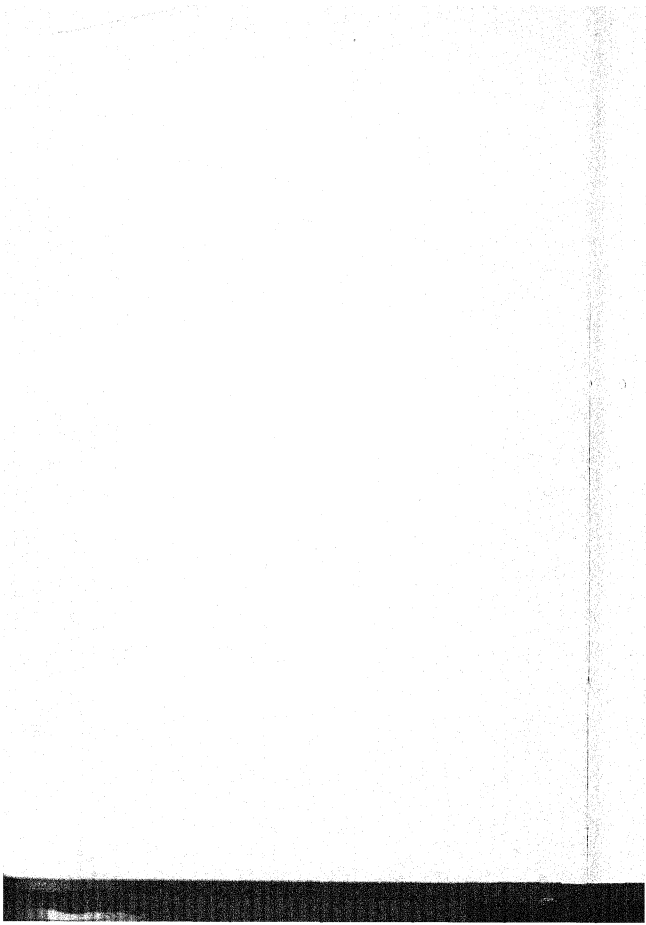


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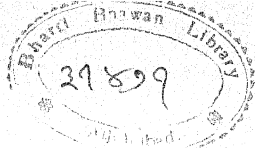
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THE ILLUSIVE FLAME

CHAPTER I

"It has been very good of you to let me talk to you, and I have to thank you for a delightful afternoon. But it's getting late now, and unfortunately I have an appointment which you had almost made me forget."

The strange man smiled delightfully as he got up with a convincing show of reluctance from the little, hard chair on which, for the last hour, he had been sitting by Penelope Craddock's side under the trees in Hyde Park. But as she raised her eyes in response to his words, and in order to follow his movements, Penelope's face reflected none of the cheerfulness depicted on his. Instead, there crept into them a dazed look of pain, as if she had suddenly awakened from pleasant day-dreaming to confront realities which excluded all fancy's joys.

"It's you who've been good," she murmured shyly. "And, indeed, it's I who've had the delightful time."

Mechanically obedient to his desire to be gone, she also rose to her feet.

"Which way do you go?"

He paused, awaiting her answer; and, with an absurdly transparent pretence at uncertainty, she hesitated before giving it, prompted by the foolish

hope that in so doing their parting might be delayed even one short second.

"I get the tube at Marble Arch—that's the way I came here—and go to Shepherd's Bush. My cousin's house is at Acton, and before I went out for the first time alone, this afternoon, she explained all I was to do so as not to get lost."

"Of course—I remember your telling me." Immediately he faced towards the Marble Arch exit.

Of course, she had told him! During the one brief hour of their acquaintance she had told him everything there was to be known about herself, and he had listened with such obviously profound interest that it had not occurred to her to falter once, assailed by apprehension lest her youthful egotism should bore him: indeed, so encouraging and inspiring had been that show of interest, that it alone was responsible for her volubility, having roused her for the first time to the realization that she possessed a history which required quite a number of words to relate.

Already he knew almost as much about Penelope's past as she did herself. For had she not told him all about the clergyman uncle at whose country rectory she had lived ever since she could remember anything; and of how she had lost her parents so long ago that she retained not the faintest shadow of a memory of them? She had described as graphically as she could her life at the rectory, among the large family of cousins, and the constant financial difficulties which made an extra mouth to feed an additional worry, a thing that must be despatched as early as possible to find a means of providing for its own wants; and how Mildred, the eldest cousin, had gone out as a mother's help two years ago, and Amy had started

training in a hospital last year ; then how she herself, only last week, had been launched forth into the world.

But, though an orphan, and with no home to which she might fly for refuge if she subsequently discovered the ways of the world too hard, Penelope took pains to explain that she was really better off than those other two fortune seekers ; for though at parting her uncle and aunt had made her understand quite clearly that she need expect no further help from them, and must in future rely entirely on her own energies for support, she was nevertheless the fortunate and proud possessor of a legacy of one hundred pounds—all that her father had been able to leave her at his death. Moreover, she had a cousin—a niece of her mother's, and an actress—who knew so much about earning a livelihood that she could afford herself a little house at Acton, and with her it had been arranged that Penelope should take up a temporary abode as a paying guest, the legacy to be partly expended on her board and lodging there, and partly on the lessons in shorthand and typewriting which were to qualify her for a well-paid post later on. She had much to say about Violet Maylie, expressed in extravagant terms of admiration, but of Violet's friend, Ada Duval—who shared the house with her—she confided little, except how she suffered from her sneers at a country girl's ignorance, inexperience, and naively expressed wonder and delight at a novel environment.

" And this is the very first time I've been out alone," she concluded exultantly. " And I felt so excited and adventurous coming so far without anybody to show me the way."

But there was a sequel to her story much more

thrilling than anything she had narrated. Perhaps he knew it already, or perhaps he did not know more than a quarter of it ; however, it was not for her to enlighten him—at least, not consciously and not in words.

What a wonderful, magic place London was ! Certainly she had started out expecting wonders, but only those that she might admire and marvel at from a distance. Yet, on her first adventure, London had produced a Prince Charming—one who had suddenly appeared from nowhere and who was worthy of being adored at first sight. With the memory of that miraculous occurrence she was striving valiantly to assuage the rapidly increasing pain which was gnawing at her heart.

Before his sudden descent upon her she had been perfectly contented with everything—contented with an unrealized loneliness, while she watched the throngs of people, motors, and carriages streaming past the spot where she had secured a vacant chair. Then, just by chance, she had glanced up and seen a man standing a few yards away, contemplating her with an air of absorbed, speculative attention. His obvious interest pleased her. It struck her as very kind of anybody to notice such an insignificant and unfashionably dressed person as herself. Accordingly she smiled back at him, as she caught his eye, to signify her gratitude.

And then he came towards her, and—and—from that moment she ceased to wonder at anything, but simply abandoned herself to the pure enjoyment of the magic present. Not until he got up to go had she realized what had befallen her—that her heart had left her possession and bestowed itself upon him.

However, that in itself was another glorious feeling—to have a heart which, while declining to remain one's own, was yet so discriminating that it knew exactly to whom it might most worthily consign itself. There she was content that it should remain everlastingly, lying at the foot of a pedestal constructed of all the virtues on which her ardent young fancy had placed this unknown man.

As, with a smile of amused wonder, the man glanced down at her, he possibly acquired some insight into her sensations. Certainly only a very unobservant onlooker could fail to perceive what was so clearly reflected in her eyes, in her whole innocent, expressive face. Already they had spoken to him so plainly that, despite his first obstinate scepticism, they had compelled him to recognize them as the windows of the soul of an authentic *ingénue*,—a rôle which, for a few moments only, he had inwardly denounced her for over-acting, for playing out at so great a length that the spectator's feelings of amusement were quickly transformed into impatience. A second or two later his sensations had undergone another change, becoming a rapidly intensifying mystification, mingled with disturbing misgivings that he had been guilty of an unaccountable blunder.

But finally he arrived at the consoling decision that, even if he had blundered, he did not regret it. After all, no harm had been intended or done to anyone, and he had enjoyed a mildly amusing and harmless hour; moreover, the episode was now near its close, and would speedily be forgotten, nobody knowing anything about it but himself and this charmingly attractive little country girl, who was not even acquainted with his name. He was a stranger, and she

was a stranger, therefore both were quite unlikely to excite either observation or remark. Time had been hanging heavily on his hands when the remarkable freshness of her prettiness had first caught his attention, and her spontaneously friendly smile had invited him to speak to her ; but nobody passing by and noticing their unconventional introduction could have any reason to believe otherwise than that they were old friends.

Yes, on the whole he was decidedly thankful that she was not the type of girl he had at first suspected her to be, but simply one with whom one might flirt a little, to pass an idle hour ; who might even be loved just a little—quite harmlessly, and because she was so pretty—and who might repay small attentions with a heartful of flattering devotion ; who was easily magnetized by a good-looking face, and a sympathetic manner which was the product of a careful study of women's requirements ; and who, finally, belonged to the species who gave no trouble when no longer wanted.

Nevertheless, his conscience now pricked him as he looked down into her eloquently appealing eyes ; for in them he could read the question, as plainly spoken as if the mobile lips had faltered it :

“ Shall I ever see you again ? Is this to be a real good-bye ? ”

He averted his glance quickly, and for a few moments stared thoughtfully in front of him ; then his mouth became twisted into the faintest of contemptuous smiles, his brows were uplifted ever so slightly, as if in helpless amazement at his own weakness ; and once more his eyes sought the face at his side.

"Have you anything to do on Tuesday afternoon?" he asked.

"N—no." Penelope drew out the word slowly, as her dazzled mind strove to visualize the events which might occur outside this hour.

"Well, if you haven't, suppose you meet me at Fuller's, and we'll have tea there together? I'll be in town till Wednesday night, so there's no reason why we shouldn't see each other again."

"Are you going away? And—and I don't even know your name!"

Something was rending her heart, causing an agony so acute that it seemed almost physical; consequently, the laugh with which he greeted her tragic tone jarred painfully on her, hurting her so that she was almost goaded into resentment at its hint of incomprehension.

"My name doesn't matter, girly," he answered, with the same cruel light-heartedness, "for on Thursday my time will be up, and I'm off back across the seas then. By this day week I'll be far away, and you'll have forgotten all about me."

"Ah!"

It did not seem to her to matter much what he was or where he went after leaving her. Nothing mattered, save the heart-breaking fact that she must really lose him, that the romance and beauty of her life-story must hereafter be a regretted memory.

Then at last he suddenly realized the poignancy of her pain and lightly administered a salve. Seeking her hand, he bestowed a slight lingering pressure upon it, and for a couple of seconds continued to hold it in his.

"Tuesday, at four o'clock, then—outside Fuller's," he reminded her consolingly, while she moved along

beside him in the silent indescribable rapture of emotions which his touch had produced. "Don't forget, and don't be late."

Forget! How could she forget?—forget anything about him, anything he asked or said or did. Be late! When for two whole nights and days life would be but a period of marking time until she saw him once more!

But her silence did not entertain him, or appeal to him in any way; he found it uncomfortable, and accordingly made haste to break it by loosing his hold on her hand and offering her something for which, he was sure, she would afterwards feel more grateful than she now did for all the unprofitable sentiments she at present believed him to have evoked.

"Look here," he said. "I want to give you a little bit of advice, and please don't be offended at my offering it. When—if it ever happens again—a man has the impertinence to stand staring at you as I did a short while back, don't smile at him as you did at me; and if he presumes to try to talk to you, give him the very hardest snub you can manage. Some day, looking back, you may consider yourself lucky in having—er—met one to-day who was capable of realizing that he merited a snub, and of acting accordingly."

"Why? I don't quite understand what you mean." In blank wonderment her eyes questioned his, while her lips were very nearly adding: "Except that I was lucky to meet *you*—for that I'll always thank Heaven." But before the admission broke from her control, she choked it back.

"Then think well over what I've said, until experience has taught you to understand it," he answered.

But this counsel was superfluous, for already she was thinking it over.

"Nobody ever does stare at me—never did before," she began positively. "And even if anybody did, I should never want to——"

Ignoring the latter part of her argument, he unceremoniously cut her short.

"Cast your eye to your left, and then, perhaps, you'll acknowledge yourself wrong," he suggested, in a quick undertone.

Penelope looked round hurriedly, but immediately afterwards she averted her eyes, and with a smothered exclamation of annoyance shrank closer to her companion.

As they were approaching the gate two men had entered by it, and sauntered towards them. It was one of these who, in passing, had bent a gaze of strange intensity upon Penelope's face—a gaze so manifestly ardent that it brought an indignant flush to her cheeks. Instinctively she quickened her pace. But that blaze of blue flame of which those eyes seemed to be made, and which had momentarily flashed its brilliance upon her, had accomplished something besides kindling her resentment; for as she passed hurriedly through the gate and across the road to the tube station, she neither looked at nor spoke to her companion, nor was she more than very vaguely conscious of his presence at her side.

For the time being something unknown seemed, with inconceivable suddenness, to have swooped upon and dispersed all the other novel sensations which had hitherto preoccupied her. An odd sense of antagonism mingled with apprehension and impotent resentment, which were as unaccountable as they were

discomposing, had spoilt the last moments of his company. But possibly their arrival was not altogether inopportune, for they forced her into temporary obliviousness of the pain of parting. So it was with scarcely a pang that Penelope watched her nameless cavalier procure her ticket to Shepherd's Bush and shook hands with him at the entrance to the lift, unconscious as yet of any renewal of the desire to tarry longer in his society.

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Meanwhile the presumptuous owner of the blue eyes rejoined his companion, who had moved on a few paces when he paused to stare at Penelope and who was now awaiting him, watching his approach with a quizzically rueful expression.

"'Pon my soul, Dufferin, any unfortunate sinner who goes out with you needs to have his feelings shut up in a fireproof safe lest his blushes should shrivel him up to a cinder," he exclaimed, half banteringly, half irritably.

To this reproof, however, the man addressed as Dufferin paid no heed.

"Did you see that face?" he asked with an abstracted air, as they walked on together.

"Hadn't time for more than a squint, being kept busy by her escort's. I had to watch his so as to know the exact minute to interfere and prevent your being knocked senseless; besides, I was taken up too with inventing excuses for your behaviour—that you weren't responsible, were often taken that way but were perfectly harmless, and that your eccentricities were well known to the police and the public, being——"

With a gesture expressive of extreme impatience, Dufferin interrupted him.

"But the face! You got a squint of it—what did you see?"

The other's shrug was certainly not complimentary to the inspirer of his friend's enthusiasm.

"Now, what *did* I see?" he said, with an exasperating air of slow deliberation. "Yes, I certainly squinted a face—the face of a small girl of seven or so who ought to have been trotting along holding mammie's hand, but which through some absurd blunder it had got stuck on the shoulders of a full-grown young woman who was certainly not taking a walk with her papa."

"Can't you try to be serious?" Dufferin grumbled. "Yes, a child's face. *The* face I've hunted for always—the one that was designed to bring me what I want."

"Anything worth looking at besides what I mentioned?" the other inquired with aggressive indifference.

Instantly his companion stopped short, pulled an envelope and a stump of pencil from a pocket, and commenced scribbling rapidly, his friend meanwhile watching him with a faintly ironical smile. Then, with the same impetuosity, he suddenly tore the paper into fragments and dashed the pencil into the road.

"It's no use—I can't get it!" he muttered despairingly. "But I *shall* have that face. I *must* have it, Marsham."

Philip Marsham shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"My dear, crazy enthusiast, isn't it already bad enough that I've seen you drive yourself demented over a shapely leg or ear or big toe; but when delirium

starts over a face, things begin to look serious," he protested, with an imperturbability which was a marked contrast to the other's vehemence. "Unless you check the tendency quickly you'll be finding yourself falling in love with some pretty girl simply because she's pretty, and I don't fancy that's the most satisfactory thing a man in your position can do."

"Pah! The girl's nothing to me—nothing but a block to which the feature or limb or complexion I want is attached. I've nothing to do with *her* but to pay her for keeping still while I turn her one interesting attribute to my own uses." Then with another gesture: "Good God! why was I such a fool as to let her go!"

"*Thank* God you showed an ounce of sense for once in your life—otherwise you'd have been lucky if you'd got off with a couple of black eyes!" Marsham ejaculated fervently.

But the artist's absorption in his disappointment was too complete to allow attention for any want of sympathy.

"I must find it. I'm going to find it, and not let it go till I've caught every gleam of innocent expression in those pure, angel features, till I've made the face live in the only way it should live—for ever—by my talent and art—on my canvas. To me there's no woman in the matter—only a face designed for my use," he muttered abstractedly.

"Luckily, your saying so doesn't make it so," Marsham contested, now rather wearily. "I'd certainly consider her something more than that, and I've every right to protest, considering that I share the studio and might find her experimenting her own particular art and talent on me, as the most likely

subject. It's only to be hoped she'll again have a stalwart colonial for a body-guard, if you ever get the chance or have the craziness to try to collar her."

"Sometime I'll find it," Dufferin mumbled. "Before she spoils it with folly and vanity or it grows old, I'll *have* to find it, I *must* find it."

CHAPTER II

BEFORE the gate of No. 7, Eglantine Villas a large cream-coloured motor car was standing, and as Penelope turned down the little side street, late on that Sunday afternoon, she halted a moment and eyed it doubtfully.

Visitors, she concluded, and was immediately oppressed by a feeling of extreme weariness. Just at present she was in no humour for visitors, or for anybody's society or conversation. Nevertheless, to show a disinclination to meet these friends of Violet's might be discourteous. When a neighbour had called at the Rectory everybody had been expected to put in an appearance. Those who were already in the house hastened to the drawing-room the minute a knock at the front door was heard, and vied with each other in their efforts to entertain the guest ; those who were out, but came home later, never thought of doing anything but strive to make up without loss of time for their previous absence. Probably Violet and Ada were relying on her to present herself in the same way. By this time they might be growing bored, for there was no knowing how long these people had been here ; they might even have come to the end of their stock of conversation and be hoping for her speedy return to afford them relief, and, possibly, to suggest to the visitor that it was getting late.

Accordingly, after letting herself in with the latch-key which Violet had reluctantly lent her, and carefully restoring it in compliance with previous instructions to the draw in the hall-stand, Penelope opened the door to the right of the narrow passage hall and entered the sitting-room with an air of perfect confidence in the popularity of her decision.

But there were only two people there after all—Violet Maylie and a very young man with a narrow chest, a rather foolish expression and white eye-lashes. As Penelope closed the door and, after advancing a step paused and appeared to hesitate, the latter rose with a muttered ejaculation; his hostess, however, remained seated, merely bestowing on the intruder a look expressive of anything save relief.

"This is my cousin—Miss Craddock," she explained carelessly, delivering the introduction as though its accomplishment would dismiss for good an absolutely uninteresting subject. Then turning on Penelope a cold, quick glance, "Ada is getting supper ready. If you want a cup of tea you'd better go to the kitchen and hurry her up."

Intuitively Penelope realized that she had blundered, that she had intruded, that she had committed some breach of social rules hitherto unknown to her.

"Yes—yes, I'd like tea," she stammered, getting flurried, becoming oblivious to everything except the necessity of a rapid retreat.

These symptoms of perturbation appeared to amuse Violet, for on perceiving them she laughed quite amiably.

"First, you'd better shake hands with Lord Vendeston, hadn't you?" she suggested with a superior air. "He's been waiting for that some time already,

you know." Then with another laugh, this time expressive of apology for the awkward behaviour of her relative, she turned again to the young man. "My cousin has never been in London till a few days ago, and has never seen anybody but a curate or so and a few batches of Sunday-school kids. She's been brought up on milk and water and tracts, and fed on 'em at a parsonage that hangs out in some turnip field at the extreme furthest edge of the back of nowhere."

To this supplementary and explanatory introduction Lord Vendeston responded with something that bore a remarkable resemblance to a nervous titter; then said, "Aw!"—and finally grasped Penelope's hand and shook it with unexpected cordiality.

"Shockin' waste!" he declared, his eyes making an unmistakably admiring survey of her face as he dropped her hand. "But, Vi'll put that all right, and London won't be swindled any longer. Joinin' the profession like her, I suppose?"

Before Penelope had time to reply, Violet interrupted.

"No, indeed she's not," she said testily. "She's taking lessons in something that'll help to a job as secretary to a cat's home or to a society for providing polar bears with bed-socks or something equally pious and stodgy. If you knew Penelope as well as I do, you couldn't fancy her at anything else."

Apparently understanding his duty and that it was wiser not to neglect it, Lord Vendeston applauded these witticisms uproariously. Nevertheless, his eyes were still on Penelope, showing that his perceptiveness was not keen enough to warn him against an unpardon-

able transgression. For their look revealed no derision, but said quite plainly, "You're pretty enough to make up for all the stodginess in the world."

"I'm learning typewriting and shorthand," Penelope explained stiffly, realizing that as yet she had not uttered a single word, and that it might be more sociable and courteous to say something before she went. "At least, I'm beginning the lessons to-morrow, for I've only been in London a week, you see, and as yet have only had time to arrange about them. Of course, Violet's only teasing when she talks about cats and polar bears; but I *do* hope to get a post as secretary of some sort. I'd like that best, though I'll take anything my training fits me for, if it's good enough to earn me a living."

"Aw!" A shadow of blank disappointment overspread Lord Vendeston's face, making it look more foolish than ever, as it was borne in on him that this creature with the adorable face might not prove as attractive a companion as her appearance had first led him to suppose.

"Now be off to Ada," Violet directed, quick to detect his change of feeling, and availing herself of it before any other variation set in. "If she knows there are three of us in the house she'll be raging that all the drudgery's left to her."

But there was no Ada to be seen, and no sign of any supper in course of preparation, when Penelope reached the kitchen. For this, however, she was not sorry. She did not like Ada Duval, and just for the moment she wanted leisure in which to think things over uninterruptedly.

Again, and all unawares, the nameless man of Hyde Park had been banished from her thoughts, although

on the homeward journey he had succeeded in recapturing the dominion which another stranger had unaccountably usurped. But his rule was puzzlingly intermittent, for Violet and her visitor had now compassed his second dethronement by turning into his kingdom a devastating hoard of misgivings and remorseful self-reproaches.

Violet was angry. That was quite evident. Violet, whom Penelope admired more than any other woman she had ever known, who was to her the wittiest, the most beautiful, the altogether most admirable heroine of romance her young fancy could conceive. And above all things she coveted Violet's goodwill, yearned not to be regarded by her as the ridiculous inferior being who was merely tolerated until such time as she betook her tedious personality elsewhere. Violet was so wonderful—*must* be so wonderful—if she could influence to hero-worship at first sight a mind which had pre-conceived such poisonous prejudices against her. At the Rectory she had always heard Violet alluded to with bated breath—that is, until the Rectory decided to transfer Penelope to her care—as a disgrace to anybody with whom she was connected. Certainly no charge, except that she was on the stage, had been brought against her, but at the Rectory that was enough to make any association with her a menace to the good repute of a relative. But if only they could have known Violet, how quickly would they have realized the injustice of this—how quickly would her beauty and charm have captivated their appreciation. If her pink and white skin, her golden hair and blue eyes, the dazzling brilliance of her smile, revealing a perfect row of even white teeth, failed to make any effect, surely the propriety and decorum of her speech

and comportment must accomplish an immediate surrender.

And Violet was angry with her, was hurt about something, and all through the blundering ignorance of her devoted worshipper.

Presently Penelope heard the sitting-room door open, and the sound of steps, whispered conversation, and suppressed laughter in the passage outside ; then the front door opened and the whispering ceased. Evidently Violet had gone down the path to see her visitor off in his cream-coloured car.

A few minutes later the hall-door shut with a violent bang, and there was a quick scurrying of high-heeled slippers along the passage.

"Well, of all the little interfering, prying fools!" an angry voice exclaimed. "Can't you take it for granted you're not wanted, and have the decency to keep out of the way till someone invites you to get into it!"

Penelope, who with her back to the door had been gazing out of the kitchen window, turned round with a start.

"I'm sorry!" she gasped. "I knew I'd made a mistake, but only after I'd made it. Really and truly I didn't mean to push in where I wasn't wanted."

"Well, go on knowing in future—if you want to steer clear of trouble," Violet retorted. She was balancing herself on the step at the kitchen door, and with a flushed face and flashing eyes was confronting the delinquent with a regard of withering scorn and indignation. "It's to see *me* that Lord Vendeston comes here—to see *me alone*—so kindly remember that. He doesn't care a fig for anyone else, except

when idiots like you make him wish you were in Jericho."

Then, at last, illumination flashed upon the obscurity of Penelope's understanding.

"Oh, is he that? I'm so—so glad!" she exclaimed fervently.

For a moment Violet scanned her suspiciously, then she burst forth anew.

"Oh, you're so glad now, are you? And for what, pray?" she demanded resentfully. "Glad that I've half a mind to heave you out on the doorstep—is that it?"

Penelope felt it was wiser to ignore the last of these queries, although they made her heart flutter apprehensively.

"That you've got someone to—to care for you so much," she faltered. "That's what I'm glad about, because—because I know how——"

A peel of derisive laughter cut her short.

"Thanks, Miss Sentimental. And how, may I ask, do you know anything about it? Been spooning with the curate, have you? Well, it's a pity you didn't employ your spare time writing twaddle to him, instead of dumping yourself where you've no business to be."

But Violet's incomprehension was an insult to Penelope's newly acquired knowledge, and produced in her a reckless craving to raise herself in her detractor's esteem by revealing the circumstances of her promotion to the ranks of those who possess first-hand experience of romance.

The egotism of youth has little use for secrecy, so in less than three minutes the events of the afternoon had been graphically described, and a

sentimental young heart laid bare for inspection and criticism.

Having finished her story she waited in breathless expectation, but for what she did not know—possibly an encouragement to hope from one who was so much more proficient in the complex ways of love, for some word of sympathy for the state of mind she had so impetuously described. But at first Violet vouchsafed no comment of any sort, merely staring at her with an expression in which the dismayed Penelope could only recognize genuinely shocked consternation, with brows lifted, lips pursed up tightly, and eyes opened to their widest extent.

Then she stepped back suddenly and called over her shoulder :

"Ada ! Ada, for pity's sake come down quick ! If you don't you'll miss the finest joke you ever heard in your life."

And when she faced round the shocked look had vanished, and her whole face was convulsed with unaccountable merriment as she staggered forward, apparently overwhelmed by her feelings, and subsided into the nearest chair shaking all over with half-suppressed laughter.

Penelope gazed at her in speechless amazement, watching the destruction of her first ideal in dazed horror.

"What are you laughing at ? " she at length found voice to demand. "What——"

Then she checked herself in order to listen, her heart thumping tumultuously, and feeling much as a wild beast must when its pursuers have brought it to bay.

Upstairs a door opened, and almost immediately Ada Duval's voice called over the banisters :

"What is it? What's up now?"

"Come!" Violet gurgled back, between her paroxysms of laughter.

As Ada's figure appeared in the doorway, Penelope turned her back on it. She had no liking for Ada, and it would never have occurred to her to confide in her cousin's special friend and *confidente*. One swift glance at the dark, sneering face was enough to inform her that the presence of this third party promised considerable aggravation to the discomfiture she was even now experiencing.

"What is it?" Ada repeated, standing as Violet had stood a few minutes ago, on the doorstep, and thereby preventing any attempt at escape on the part of her victim.

"Oh, what is it?" Violet spluttered helplessly. "Why, Pen's in love! She's just slobbered and drivelled it all out, and nearly been the death of me!"

"In love." Ada paused a moment after echoing the words, then laughed too, but with an ugly sneering sound. "Whoever with?" she went on. "The Salvation Army man who yells at the corner near the tube station, is it?"

This suggestion again convulsed Violet, rendering her inarticulate until she had found relief for her feelings by rocking herself from side to side, and so ridding herself of the stifling effect of her frenzy of enjoyment.

"No—oh, no—not half so respectable as that," she at length contrived to gasp. "It's a loafer she picked up in the Park—oh, I wish you could have heard her tell about it!"

"Tut-tut, Penelope!" Ada's sneering voice remonstrated.

With her back still resolutely turned upon her tormentors, Penelope, though with some difficulty, maintained an obstinate silence. Vaguely, she was beginning to realize that she had been ridiculous, and that anything she might add to what had already been said would make her even more so ; moreover, she feared to trust her voice lest it should betray how very near she was to tears.

But it was very hard—it was almost unendurable to stand silently by and hear Violet, amid outbursts of derisive giggling, give an embellished version of her adventure to the listener who stood sentinel in the doorway and who supplemented comments, criticisms, and suggestions which caused every sensitive feeling Penelope possessed to squirm and writhe, to hear her voice and manner mimicked and burlesqued so that she felt a fool and was next consumed with impotent rage at her own folly now displayed as it appeared to other eyes.

Presently, unable to bear inaction any longer, and knowing that she had no way of escape unless Ada moved from the doorstep, she bethought her of an occupation which might possibly divert her attention to some extent until her tormentors had wearied of their cruel entertainment ; accordingly she retreated to the scullery, and there commenced to collect the cups and plates required for supper.

Now, for the first time, she accused Violet of lying to her when she had declared that Ada was in the kitchen some time ago—what a difference ridicule of one's most sacred feelings could make in one's opinion of friends ! How stupid of her not to remember that Violet and Ada never took any meal at home unless there was someone to prepare it for them ;

that they never, as far as she had hitherto observed, did any work at all, possibly with a view to reserving their energies for their different professions—Violet's nights at the theatre, and Ada's mornings spent in the strenuous occupation of giving lessons in acrobatic dancing to a class of professionals.

As far as it was possible, without smashing anything, she contrived to make enough noise with the crockery to render completely indistinguishable a large amount of what was said in the room beyond; nevertheless, a good deal reached her in isolated sentences.

"Poor simpleton! She was bound to get it, just like a kid does the measles!" she heard Ada declare.

This evoked her friend's enthusiastic applause.

"But she doesn't know enough about the disease to get any benefit from it," Violet's rather high-pitched voice went on. "Why not get down your maudlin old Swinburne and reel off a couple of his effusions to her. A few tips like that might get her ideas into working order—there's no knowing."

"Pearls before swine," Ada returned with a yawn. "Haven't I spouted my pet pieces a dozen times, and she's only gaped and looked stupefied. All the same, I'd give something to see her learn a thing or two by lurid experience, if it wasn't for the fear I might die of boredom or hysterics during the process."

At last, however, the scraping of Violet's chair, as she pushed it back, proclaimed that the latest source of amusement was exhausted and that she contemplated betaking herself elsewhere.

"Hi, Penelope!" she called out. "We're faint with exertion, so would you mind getting us some refreshments as soon as you're able to rouse yourself out of love's young dream and look alive. Stimulate

yourself by remembering you're only suffering from an infantile malady, and don't make too much of your symptoms—they're not serious; and though you don't seem to appreciate our ministrations as you should, we've doctored you well on the way to recovery. Try to feel grateful, my child."

A fresh burst of laughter and Violet had reached the door, where she linked arms with her friend; and together they retreated to the sitting-room, their conversation now dropping to such a subdued undertone that it only reached Penelope in a series of faint intermittent murmurs.

"Good Lord, what a damned little idiot!" Ada muttered as she turned away.

"Just so; but I'd not have missed this for a good deal. I've not laughed so much since I don't know when."

But Ada appeared much less satisfied.

"You should never have let her come here," she grumbled irritably. "For all you know she'll be getting herself into some scrape, through her inane greenness, and we'll be blamed by the parson for not looking after her, and have him and the complete holy outfit on our tracks. Can't you pack her back to the turnip field, and say——"

"Say she was too larky to live with people who'd reputations to keep up?" Violet interrupted with an appreciative titter.

Ada made an impatient movement.

"Say what you like, but for the Lord's sake get rid of her."

"Oh, she's not going to be a fixture in my choice of abodes—no fear!" Violet reassured her carelessly.

"Then pitch her out before she gets to think herself one—to-morrow for preference."

"I might—indeed I might if I weren't so wretchedly tender-hearted, you know," Violet returned. "When I came to the point I'd shy at it, I'm certain; so, on the whole, I think I'll transfer the job to you."

"I'll not shy at it," Ada declared with her little sneering laugh. "In fact, the sooner I take it on the better I'll be pleased."

"Right oh!" her friend agreed indifferently. "But wait till Tuesday night, anyway. I'm tender-hearted, you know, and wouldn't like her bun-worry spoilt. As soon after that as ever you like."

For some reason, which she did not disclose, Violet appeared to find this arrangement excruciatingly comic, for as she entered the sitting-room another uncontrollable paroxysm of laughter seized her, and she sank helplessly into the first available chair.

CHAPTER III

It was not until many months later that Penelope perceived any truth in her cousin's assertion that the ordeal she had endured that Sunday evening was in the nature of a cure for her disease. Neither that dose, nor those subsequently administered during the next two days, were in the least to her taste, or bore any likeness to the treatment she wished her case to receive. It was hateful to hear this subdued ecstasy—which, as she tenderly fostered it, grew daily more and more intense—alluded to as a common malady. However, being now completely disillusioned as to Violet's worthiness of hero-worship, she had the satisfaction of unhesitatingly denouncing her opinions as mere folly and ignorance.

Nevertheless, it was Violet who had found a name for her condition—a name on which Penelope's heart dwelt in awed wonder during most of the forty-eight hour interval between her first and second—oh, no, not the last!—meeting with the nameless prince of romance.

In love!

Her whole being thrilled with an exquisite triumph and pride at the words.

But she should have guessed it for herself, and much sooner. Why had Violet's absurdities been necessary to enlighten her? Perhaps she had become confused

by too many quotations from Swinburne, too many only half comprehended anecdotes of Violet's innumerable *amours*—and how could she have realized that her dream-ecstasy might share a name with these?

Save the promise of Tuesday afternoon, life to Penelope, during those forty-eight hours, held nothing of importance or interest. In the present she was merely awaiting a future whose limits did not extend beyond four o'clock on Tuesday afternoon.

On Monday she certainly attended her first lesson in typewriting, but on Tuesday she felt the postponement of the second to be absolutely essential, and by playing truant made an inauspicious commencement to her career as a worker.

On Tuesday morning it was evident that Violet also had an appointment, for, contrary to her usual custom, she got up shortly after Mrs. Catly, the char-woman, who cooked and cleaned during the earlier part of the day at No. 7, brought up her breakfast to her bedroom. And at midday, while Penelope was busy finishing the work which Mrs. Catly had left undone, she appeared at the kitchen door, tastefully attired in flowing white draperies and a huge black hat, very much scented and with a complexion of dazzling pink and whiteness.

"Hallo Cinderella!" she remarked genially. "Here's a fairy godmother for you, if you want one. I'm going to give you free leave to rifle everything in my room, and to help yourself to all the trimmings you may think likely to add to your attractions."

Penelope's look of astonishment contained far more suspicion than gratitude, as she straightened herself in order to survey her would-be benefactress.

"Are you going out now?" she asked, ignoring the offer. After the hurts her most cherished feelings had sustained, she felt no inclination to accept favours from Violet.

"Oh, yes; don't think you're the only one," Violet returned. "I'm off to make a day of it, so you needn't expect me till you see me."

"You won't be home till you get back from the theatre to-night, I suppose?"

A queer expression flitted over Violet's face as she replied, but only momentarily did it attract Penelope's notice.

"Don't expect so," she answered, after a scarcely perceptible pause.

"Will it be all right to leave the house with no one in it?" Penelope questioned doubtfully. "Miss Duval said she'd be late, and I—I don't know how——"

But a malicious twinkling in Violet's eyes and twitching of her lips gave warning that an outburst of derisive hilarity was imminent and that the sentence had therefore better remain incomplete.

"Oh, *you'll* be racing the milkman, no doubt," Violet predicted cheerfully. "If Ada and I were both here, and awake, we might have a bet on who'd arrive first, and I'd back our morning milk. But don't bother your head about the house. It can look after itself, being used to the job. And don't forget to borrow any of my things if you want to rig yourself out in style. There's a blue and green shot taffeta that would bring him to his knees by itself without your having to be inside at all."

"Thank you very much," Penelope rejoined, though without effusion. "But I don't think I'll wear your

things. I've a new white dress that I made just before I came here."

Violet's shrug and its accompanying laugh signified her complete indifference as to how Penelope chose to dress.

"More chaste, if less captivating, than anything I could offer, I'm sure," she observed as she turned away. "Well, I'm off. So long!"

With a swish of silken petticoats and a sprightly click-click of high-heeled shoes on the tiled floor, she was gone before Penelope had time to respond to her airy farewell.

Left alone once more, Penelope sought the mirror hanging on the kitchen wall—there were mirrors everywhere at 7, Eglantine Villas—and for a minute surveyed herself anxiously. On the whole, although beset by apprehensions lest she had appeared ungrateful, she decided that her rejection of Violet's offer had been well advised. Violet's clothes were chosen to match a brilliant colouring, and might look out of place against a pale skin and brown hair and eyes. After looking at Violet the insignificance of her own appearance was rather mortifying, certainly. But at least, she was not going to feel jealous—of that she had no apprehensions at all. One had only to conjure up a vision of Lord Vendeston and to contrast it with her recollections of the nameless man to become quite certain on that point.

Turning from the glass she crossed over to the window, and for some minutes lingered by it, gazing out with dreamy eyes upon the plot of ragged grass surrounded by a tarred plank fence, which was backyard and garden to her cousin's home.

No, when she thought of Lord Vendeston, she was

almost sorry for Violet. But then, tastes differ so much, that possibly—though it seemed incredible—he might be some people's ideal.

As far as her own tastes were concerned he was, for one thing, a great deal too young, and much too fair. Moreover, she preferred a face with more character in it.

As her thoughts visualized another type, her lips curved into a tender smile. In the other there was nothing she did not admire and like, had not admired and liked at the first glance—his upright carriage and tanned face ; the impression he gave her of being so much older than herself, although she really could not venture to estimate his age, having met so few young men and being consequently unable to tell how time dealt with their looks ; his grey eyes were the nicest she had ever seen, as were also his close-cropped hair, and his smile. Furthermore, she had even grown to regard with reverent affection his straw hat, his navy-blue suit, and light-coloured waistcoat.

Having mentally passed all his attractions in review, she sighed as she reached the last.

Ah, well, in less than four hours she would no longer be relying on memory to inform her of his superiority over the rest of mankind. In less than four hours ! Oh, what a glorious, wonderful thing life was, so full of hidden gifts and surprises ! It was surely much too kind to give only that it might snatch away. Something would happen—something as miraculous as—

Undoubtedly Fate had directed her to Hyde Park last Sunday, had placed her in that chair, then guided him to it, prompting him to look at her, inspiring him to smile at her—had done it all for the only conceivable

reason such things should be done—that two happy life-stories might be recorded.

Oh, if only the clock's hands would move faster ! She was impatient for the climax of that story . . . she couldn't wait . . .

CHAPTER IV

" WHY so pensive, girlie ? "

The question, with its implied accusation, startled Penelope, instantly converting her wistful look into one of contrition. But with her eyes alone did she answer the words.

" Do you not like these beautiful things ? " He indicated a plate laden with an assortment of sugared cakes, then glanced at her in amused inquiry.

Apprehensive lest he should think her ungrateful, and fearing even more that he might consider it a waste of time to stay longer unless justice were done to the delicacies he had ordered, Penelope hastily helped herself to a cake.

But she did not want cakes. She wanted nothing, consciously, save to be allowed to sit here for ever and ever, watching the face she worshipped, and listening to the band whose music formed an accompaniment to the sentimental tune in her heart.

Presently her companion took out his watch.

" After five," he observed. " Why, I believe you've been nearly an hour nibbling one miserable little cake ! "

" Surely it can't be so late ! Isn't your watch fast ? " Both eyes and tone betrayed an agony of suspense.

Suddenly he shifted his chair, bringing it close beside hers.

"Are you having such a good time, little girl?"

Not daring again to trust her voice, Penelope restricted her answer to a smile.

"Then, don't you take your pleasure rather sadly, like a Scotsman?" he went on. "For you certainly don't give one the impression that you like your tea."

"It's really too hot to eat anything to-day."

The idea that she was boring him was beginning to haunt her, that he was ransacking his brains for something to say to her. Nevertheless, she was doing her utmost not to believe that he considered her a child; that good-nature alone had induced him to waste time upon her entertainment; that he was giving her a treat much as he would give it to a child. And then it suddenly flashed on her that all she had been feeling was not, as she had striven to convince herself, a happiness so amazing that it rendered her dumb, but rather an inarticulate hope struggling to delay the inevitable moment of its extinction. She was so anxious to believe that he cared for her a little, but the belief was losing power minute by minute. Why, after all, should he care—this man who was so captivating that thousands of women must have lost their hearts to him. Until just now her visions had not been marred by these particular reflections; until now . . .

Meanwhile, scrutinizing her with the eyes of one who had grown expert in divining such thoughts, the man's conscience smote him.

This girl, in her utter friendlessness and ignorance, might be destined to enjoy so little that was harmless and innocent, and she was so obviously easy to gratify; so why withhold from her the trifling amount of pleasure that it was in his power to bestow? After

to-day he would probably never see her again, consequently there could be no chance of their acquaintance proving an embarrassment to himself in the future. To spare her one evening would cost him very little inconvenience—none, in fact, beyond cancelling an appointment with a man he scarcely knew and cared about less. Moreover, although she was deplorably dowdily dressed, she was so pretty that even the most fastidious need not feel ashamed to be seen with her.

Perhaps he was more flattered by the secret her eyes had divulged than he cared to own. Perhaps, also, there still lingered in his mind some memory of and sympathy for the absurd, heart-breaking seriousness of one-sided calf love. Furthermore, he may even have experienced a twinge of remorse, and so wished to leave her a recollection of something to testify that the sentiments he had evoked were not entirely despised.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "What do you say to our making an evening of it—doing a dinner and a theatre together? I'm on if you are, and in the meantime we can loaf about or sit here, just as you like."

The light which instantly flashed into her eyes should have adequately rewarded him. But only for a second was it visible, a shadow of troubled uncertainty speedily obscuring it.

"But—didn't you tell me you had an appointment at six o'clock?" she faltered.

"I can ring the chap up this minute and tell him I won't be there," the consoling reassurance came promptly.

As if by magic her expression changed from wistfulness to radiance, and he laughed indulgently as he

perceived the transformation. Of course she was very silly, he told himself; yet her silliness was decidedly naïve and refreshing. Had he been twenty years older, he was convinced that her youth and ingenuousness would have assuredly won her an easy conquest; but, luckily for himself, and perhaps also for her, those additional twenty years were necessary to make simplicity appear irresistible.

Meanwhile, renewed hope was fortifying Penelope's failing spirits: "He wouldn't give up so much to stay with me unless he cared," it whispered.

Months later, when she had leisure for retrospection, Penelope was always amazed at the disconnectedness and vagueness of her recollections of that wonderful evening. Only a few incidents seemed to have arrested her attention and contrived to leave clear impressions on her mind. That, for instance, of his having halted before a jeweller's window in Regent Street, and proposed that he should buy her some souvenir; and of how the mere suggestion had turned her hot all over, conjuring up as it did a vision of Violet's trinket-box, and an echo of Violet's high-pitched voice referring to it as a receptacle for "scalps." How fervently she had hoped then that her rejection of the offer had not sounded ungraciously emphatic; but misgivings on this score had afflicted her a good deal, for in that, as in everything else connected with this evening, she feared she had not acquitted herself as creditably as she should have done.

Nevertheless, later on she did accept a box of chocolates—a box which, with its contents untouched and its blue satin ribbon untampered with, remained one of her most sacred and cherished possessions for many months. Quite distinctly she could always

recall the moment when it became hers, the exact quality of the donor's smile as he presented it, the tune played by the orchestra as she bent her eyes on the blue bow because she durst not raise them to encounter his.

Subsequently, chocolate-boxes with blue bows recalled a stricken feeling in her heart, which she had once mistaken for the extremity of happiness—a joy so intense that it inflicted pain.

But her memories of the dinner were always hazy—where it took place, what it consisted of, everything about it. Nor was her recollection of the theatre they afterwards went to much clearer, except that, once when the lights went down, he had held her hand for a brief transcendent moment. Neither did the supper leave any vivid impression on her mind—the supper to which she was bidden to half-heartedly, and to which she went in utter unconsciousness of the strain imposed on her host's good-nature, went with no other motive save that of delaying the parting.

But the drive back to Eglantine Villas! Yes, that at least was a perfectly clear recollection, indelibly branded on a tortured heart. Sitting far back in the taxi, with the shadows concealing the misery in her face, she had felt an arm steal round her, while her heart reiterated a fervent prayer that his lips might pronounce some comfort for its intolerable loneliness. But while praying she dared not look at him, nor trust her voice to utter a word.

Then at last he spoke, and recognizing the half-pitying amusement his tone betrayed, she had writhed with a novel sensation of humiliation and shame.

"I think I can guess what's making you sad, little

girl," he had said. "But I know, too, even more surely, that you'll soon forget."

Then hope breathed its last, and lay mute and lifeless; for she realized that she had bestowed an undesired gift; that he was perfectly cognisant of the treasure she had laid at his feet and was kicking it back to her. And in its utter desolation her heart cried out: "Why can't you just say you care a little and are sorry to go? That's all—that's absolutely all I want to hear!" But none save the Recording Angel heard that despairing cry.

Oh, how fast the taxi travelled that night—as if it were racing to outstrip the now scarcely possible fulfilment of her dream!

He—she could call him nothing else, for he had not divulged his name—directed the driver to stop at the top of the road of little red-brick houses and to wait there while he escorted her as far as the door of No. 7. And the walk through the darkness, short as it was—how many things did it not suggest, and—almost promise! Well, if it disappointed in all else, it at least afforded the opportunity for an unwitnessed adieu.

On the door-step, sheltered by the porch, he took her hands in his and drew her to him, lightly pressing his lips upon hers for an instant. But Penelope did not return the salute; instead, she gave a little stifled sob and wished she might drop dead at his feet before suffering the anguish of seeing him depart for ever.

Then he took the latch-key from her, opened the door, and pushed her gently across the threshold.

"Good-night and good-bye, little girl," he whispered.

And the door was shut, swiftly and softly, leaving Penelope alone in the darkness within.

Pressing her head against it, she listened to his retreating foot-steps, and the beating of her heart became the pulse of a burning pain. Except for its throbs, and the quick steps growing gradually fainter in the distance, there was no sound in either house or street ; and to her, at that moment, there were no others in the whole world—all creation was holding its breath, watching and listening while her god abjured her.

Standing there alone in the darkness, Penelope was experiencing one of those short-lived, acute, unseen and unheard-of agonies which are youth's acquaintance with heart-break, during which the cherished illusions melt away, the beloved idols topple down and crumble into dust.

How long she might have remained thus it is impossible to tell, had not a sudden noise aroused her, recalling her to a realization of her surroundings, startling her into alertness, and forcing her to seek its meaning and whereabouts.

Behind her a door had opened, and a second later an unsympathetically prosaic voice hailed her with :

"Hullo !"

CHAPTER V

THE sudden interruption, inopportune and unwelcome as she was still inclined to regard it, acted on her feelings as an immediate and strong restorative, putting her at once on the defensive against ridicule, prompting her intuitively to screen her pain behind a show of indifference.

It was Ada who was peering out at her through the sitting-room doorway, but, her back being to the light, it was impossible to distinguish and be warned by her expression.

"Oh, so it's you, is it?" she remarked, as Penelope advanced bravely a couple of paces. Then she wheeled round and re-entered the sitting-room.

Apparently, she was not interested in Penelope at the moment, and had only looked out in the hope of discovering someone else.

"I'm afraid I'm dreadfully late," Penelope said, pausing just outside the still open doorway, but without allowing herself to become visible. "I think I'll go straight to bed."

"No, you won't!"

This astonishing rejoinder, delivered with, even for Ada, an unusual amount of acid incivility, acted as a second dose of most effective tonic on the atrophy which had temporarily overwhelmed Penelope's wits and common sense, diverting her thoughts into

speculations on other fatalities wholly disconnected from the present heart-rending tragedy.

"Come in, can't you? You give me the fidgets by standing out there," came the ungracious invitation, while she still hesitated how to act or whether she should deign to reply. "I thought it was Vi, and that's why I looked out," the disagreeable voice went on. "But as you're not her, you may as well wait up till she comes, and let her in."

"But why? Can't——"

"Shut up and don't argue. Can't you come in when I tell you?"

Penelope complied, not because she felt in the least inclined to obey Ada, or, indeed, any request uttered in such a tone, but simply that it was more comfortable to speak to a person one could see and whose aspect might provide some clue to, or excuse for, this strange behaviour.

"Is anything wrong?" she inquired, advancing into the lighted room and confronting Miss Duval, who, from the hearth-rug, was glowering upon her with a morose air of resentment.

"Vi should be home by now—it's after her time—and I've waited long enough," Ada grumbled.

"But why worry about it? Violet never wants anyone to sit up for her."

Ada made an impatient movement, and frowned as though her powers to endure such stupidity were being strained to their utmost limits.

"Don't be an idiot," she advised. "Don't you know we've only two keys, and that you've got one; and can't your common sense tell you I must have the other, else how should I have got in to-night?"

"Oh, of course," Illumination suddenly broke

upon Penelope. Of course, Violet had lent her key when it was understood that her guest would be the earliest to return. How thoughtless of her not to have remembered that. Then Penelope's wounded heart winced.

"Well, I'm not going to stay up any longer—I've had a tiring enough day without adding a sleepless night to it, and I can't sleep it out in the morning the way Vi can. She should consider that, and I'll tell her so. Now you'd better sit up. You're the person to do it, as you took her key and made the bother. I'm off to bed."

Without waiting for any assurance of Penelope's willingness to acquiesce, Ada brushed past her, twitching the door shut as she crossed the threshold.

Penelope had no objection to staying up, however, except when apprehension beset her that, despite the lateness of the hour, Violet on her return should elect to put her through a facetious catechism as to the occurrences of the afternoon. But as minutes became half-hours, and half-hours stretched into hours, she even ceased to trouble over this: physical weariness finally overwhelming every other sensation save that of a vague, semi-conscious memory of a disappointment that she was now too mentally tired to attempt to analyse or define. She had reached a condition in which all her energy was requisitioned to prevent her eyes from straying from the clock, her ears from failing to hear a step on the path outside.

Suddenly she made the startling discovery that the small hand of the clock was pointing to the figure four. She sat upright and shook herself, realizing that it was broad daylight which caused the flame of the gas to appear so dim and spectral. Could she have fallen

asleep, and had some sound outside—a knock or a footfall—been accountable for rousing her ?

Instantly she was all activity, springing to her feet and running into the hall, then cautiously opening the front door and peering down the path and round the corner to scan the whole of the deserted street. But there was no Violet to be seen anywhere—and how still everything was, and how lonely it all looked !

Perhaps, as she had evidently reached the stage of somnolence at which it became absolutely impossible to rely on holding herself awake, it would be wiser to remain near the door, where a knock or a ring would be certain to penetrate her dreams. Having decided this, she turned out the gas in the sitting-room and, returning to the hall, sat down on the lowest step of the stairs.

A growing nervousness on Violet's account at first agitated her into wakefulness, forcing on her imagination harrowing suggestions of every conceivable accident that might have occurred. Nothing but an accident, she was convinced, could keep anyone out so late as this. Oh, if only there were some one to whom she might confide her fears ! But there was nobody—nobody except Ada—who would resent the disturbance, and who was, moreover, the last person she could induce herself to confide in.

But even anxiety at last failed to keep her in the world of consciousness, and without realizing what she did she stretched out her tired limbs, leaned her bewildered, throbbing head against the banisters, and let her eye-lids close.

Only a moment seemed to have elapsed, however, when something caused her to sit up with a fresh start, rubbing her eyes and recognizing with consternation

that this time she had actually fallen asleep—had been asleep for some hours probably, for the hall was now flooded with sunlight and the sounds from outside made it plain that the whole world was well awake.

“What the dickens are you blocking up the stairs for?” an exasperated voice demanded. “’Pon my soul, one would think you’d come home on the rim of your hat, and that the floor had stood up and hit you on the back before you could find a chair and sit down respectably. Get out of my way, can’t you?”

Thus adjured, Penelope pulled herself upright and drew in her legs, blinking several times before she could focus her sleep-dimmed sight on the figure before her. It was Ada of course—Ada looking refreshed, but far from amiable, after the night’s rest.

However, the apparition did not remain long enough to give her time to excuse her present position, but brushed quickly past, turning down the little passage, at right-angles to the hall, which led to the kitchen.

And when it had disappeared her tired mind dismissed it without a second thought. Again her eyelids drooped, and she sank into a pleasantly lethargic state, half-sleeping, half-waking. There were sounds around her, but they mingled readily with her dreams, leaving her peace unmolested. Somewhere she heard a voice, and in a drowsy murmur answered it mechanically.

Then someone shook her roughly by the arm, and, starting violently, she sat up with a sickening sense of shock.

CHAPTER VI

"Is that you, Violet?" Penelope asked, pressing her hands upon the eye-lids which were too stiff from fatigue to open at her will.

A grating laugh answered her. Then, "Yes, Violet—*Violet*—*VIOLET*!" was hissed in her ear by someone whose face must be almost touching the top of her head.

"Thank Heaven!"

Once more the ruthless hand seized her shoulder, this time giving it a much more vigorous shake.

"Wake up, you young donkey, and read this. Then see if you can thank Heaven so piously."

By this time Penelope could see, although her eyes smarted horribly; and she perceived that with the other hand Ada was shaking a piece of paper in her face.

"I thought Violet had come," she muttered, as she mechanically received the paper and examined it.

A first glance showed her that it was covered with sprawling handwriting which she recognized as Violet's, and was very closely written; and her first sensation as she looked was one of surprise that Violet should have troubled to write to anyone at such length.

"Ada, you'll be as raging as a mad dog when you get this," she read, blinking at the pages, while tears trickled down her cheeks because sleeplessness had

made her eyes so weak that the effort was torture to them, "but as I'm Viscountess Vendeston now, and well out of your clutches, you may storm and rave all you like! I've got married on the sly, for fear of your tantrums, and of your bullying me into promising to share my good luck if I told you beforehand. As things are now, you must be content with my leavings—the furniture and clothes and odds and ends that were mine. I'm really treating you generously, old girl, as you'll see by the fifty-pound note enclosed to pay the rent and any debts there may be. Also, you've the compensation of pitching Penelope out on the door-step—which you can do with my blessing as soon as you like. There was really good reason for my hastening to marry little Blinks, for he came of age yesterday, you know, so I had to look sharplest his mamma should bestow him on someone else—she'll not welcome me as a daughter-in-law at first, I fear. And now, look here, Ada—I've chucked the old life and taken on with the one I've always coveted more than anything, so I can't afford to be bothered by people who knew me in the profession; therefore, old girl, this is a real good-bye. Please convey the message to Penelope—that poor relations will appeal to me as little as old acquaintances. Anyway, she was never my sort, and I'd never have had her here if I'd not somehow got surprised into it by those parson people. She's nothing to us, so we needn't care what becomes of her—no need to tell you that, though!—and she's a fool who can only learn sense by buying her own experience, so it's really a kindness to chuck her out. Just send her about her business, and then make the best of all you've got. I can't expect congratulations from you, I suppose, but I really can

manage without, as you don't exist in the world I now adorn—neither you nor Pen.; be sure you impress that well on her. At five o'clock I sneaked back to leave this scribble on the gas-stove in the kitchen and put a few things together that I had to take—I'd kept the key of the back door; I suppose none of you thought I could get in until you were back to let me! There's a piece of wedding-cake, too, for you both to dream upon—hope you'll enjoy it and that the dreams will be nice. Now I feel I've done more than my duty, and am quite satisfied all round—I needn't have written at all, you know, or left any money either—so good-bye, and, for goodness' sake, don't forget that Violet Maylie, whose last will and testament this is, decorates the world no longer."

As she handed the letter back Penelope heaved a deep sigh, then smiled as if its perusal had given her pleasure. As yet she was too stupefied to understand any part of it thoroughly, except that which told of Violet's safety and the good fortune that had overtaken her. So for some minutes she sat, holding the paper and still smiling, waiting until Ada had carefully examined the fifty-pound note, and stowed it away in a little bag that hung on her wrist.

There was something greedily hasty about Ada's movements as she did this, which struck the onlooker as being not only strange but exceedingly disagreeable, something furtively rapacious in her hard, restless eyes, as they dwelt lingeringly on the crisp slip of paper.

"You've changed your tone now, I fancy?" Ada fired the question in a tone of the bitterest hostility, as she snapped the clasp of her bag.

"No," Penelope replied tranquilly. "It's still the 'thank Heaven' one."

Nevertheless, the smile had faded from her face.

Ada picked up a small cardboard box from the hall table and tossed it into her lap.

"There's your share of the legacy," she snarled. "Eat it for your breakfast, or dream on it as she advises—it's all one to me."

As if to protect it against Ada's venom, Penelope instantly covered the box with her hand.

"Do you not feel relieved?" she asked wonderingly. "While I sat here last night I had blue fits with fright, picturing Violet being run over when she was crossing one of those terrible streets—it could happen so easily when a person was bewildered by the bustle and the hurrying lights, that it's——"

"Shut up, you little simpleton!" Ada interrupted angrily. "Don't dare to attempt to choke piousness and unselfishness down my throat, or to make out you're not posing when you talk such twaddle. You're thinking of yourself the whole time—hoping you'll manage to wheedle something more substantial than the sack out of me by trying to make me believe your virtues are worth something."

"I'm not. I really mean what I say," Penelope declared with more heat and animation than she had yet exhibited. "And I think you should at least feel a little bit glad at Violet's good fortune—such a wonderful, story-book sort of good fortune, too."

"Glad! Story-book fiddlesticks!" Ada exploded derisively. "A heroine of a precious sordid story her pranks will make of you, as you'll discover when you're out on your own—which you'll be before you're an hour older. Glad, indeed! With the business of

getting rid of this house to tackle, when I've enough to do already to keep myself, and considering that this place was simply another freak of Vi's, which I only countenanced on condition she paid the biggest share. Glad! The one thing I'm glad of is that I'm not the only victim, and that a fool like you hasn't half as good a chance of finding her feet again as I have.

"What are you wasting your time sprawling there for?" she demanded roughly, grabbing Penelope by the arm and almost upsetting her own balance in the effort to drag her to her feet. "Don't you know you've got to pack up and clear out now—don't you understand that? And the sooner you set about it the better for everybody."

Penelope shook off the rough grasp and scrambled to her feet. For a moment she stared at Ada aghast, the full meaning of Violet's desertion, as it would affect herself, breaking upon her for the first time, and bearing with it the terrifying realization of her utterly helpless forlornness.

"Was Violet serious?" she asked in a voice rendered scarcely audible by the strangling effect of her fears. "Surely she didn't mean that I was to go out at once. Surely you can't mean it either?"

"I don't know what Vi meant except by what she said and what you read with your own eyes; but it's exactly what I've been looking forward to, and what I've every intention of making happen," Ada retorted remorselessly. "But if you want to argue, and for me to explain more clearly—dense, thick-skinned creature who can't take a hint as anybody with an ounce of sensitiveness or pride would do—let's get it over quick, and find a more comfortable place than

this for the entertainment. I'm dead-beat, but I'm hanged if I'll think of breakfast until business is settled ; so I'll lie down and have a smoke inside while we thrash the subject out."

Without waiting for an assent, Ada plunged into the sitting-room and flung herself full length upon the sofa ; then, while Penelope was still debating as to whether it would be expedient to follow, she called out, " Open the door to Catly—I see her coming up the path—and tell her to start on my breakfast ; I'll be ready, and will need it badly by the time she's got it ready for me. *My breakfast, mind—for the last hospitality you get here is the seat you may sit on while I hammer sense into your dull head.*"

Penelope waited until she heard the charwoman's knock, and then acquiesced in as far as to unlatch the door ; she did not, however, pass on the instructions concerning breakfast. Now that she was fully awake, and fully alive, not only to the hopelessness, but to the extreme unpleasantness of her position, resentment against Ada's behaviour was rousing in her a spirit that declined to submit to any unnecessarily extra hectoring.

Accordingly, after unfastening the latch she retreated, leaving the charwoman to shut the door and to pursue her own undirected course as to what she should do next, and waited until she had passed out of earshot before confronting Ada from the threshold of the sitting-room.

" I don't think there's any need for us to discuss things further," she said, speaking very low, but in a voice so steady and so coldly resolute that its sound amazed herself almost as much as it did her hearer. " Nothing has been left unsaid, as it is, and a great deal

more has been said than was in the least necessary. I'm going to pack up my things now."

Ada, who had lit a cigarette, and was puffing at it with a very transparent pretence at enjoyment, sat up suddenly and gaped at her as if electrified.

"Hallo!" she ejaculated. "What! has the worm turned at last?" Then, with a little laugh whose sneer, however, sounded less confident than usual, "Tired of turning the other cheek, eh, now you find nobody admires you for it?"

"No," Penelope answered, this time a little breathlessly, for the temper which she generally found amenable to discipline was threatening to get beyond her control. "I merely understand that it was a mistake for me to come here at all, and I now wish to rectify it without delay. As to turning the other cheek—I've already stood more from you than I'll ever stand from anyone again, and the reason I've stood it was that—that by resenting it in a way, you would understand would mean having to sink to your level. I'd sooner undergo anything, almost, than have to do that."

"Eh?" Ada was regarding her with a look of amazed curiosity, which feeling for the moment appeared to have submerged her antagonism.

"I fancy you heard, so there's no need to repeat it," Penelope returned.

"Oh, so you've been considering yourself my superior all this time, and praising God for not making us alike, have you!" Ada's expression darkened once more, and she flung herself back against the sofa-cushions with a little grunt of rage. "Well, I hope you'll be able to preserve your white-robed excellence, but I doubt it. Golly! wouldn't I give a five-pound

note to know what you've grown into by this time next year. Pulling the devil by the tail isn't so sweetening to the temper, you know, or very good for the morals either."

"Well, I'm quite confident I can look after mine."

Penelope was about to depart, disgusted with herself for bandying words with her enemy, instead of making an immediate and more dignified retreat, when Ada called to her again.

"Wait a minute, Penelope," she implored, almost pathetically. "I may never see you again, or know anything about you, and I'm no end interested, if you'd only believe it. Do tell me where you think of going and what you think of doing, and how you hope to end?"

But Penelope was not in a yielding mood, and the tone of request neither deceived nor softened her.

"What I intend to do is my own concern, and I'd sooner keep it so," she said, as she turned to ascend the stairs.

On reaching her own room she went straight to the window and for some minutes scanned the prospect before her, but no longer with eyes which surveyed the world through the rose-coloured haze of youth's optimistic fancy.

How ugly it all looked—the little patch of fenced-in yard with its ragged grass plot and the wire clothes-line on which Mrs. Catly had just hung a discoloured, unsightly dishcloth; the bleak expanse of waste ground beyond the fence, dotted with placarded notices announcing that the land was to be let or sold for building purposes; and further away still, the hoarding that hid the Uxbridge Road from view, allowing only occasional glimpses of passing buses and trams. Yes,

it was very ugly ; yet, only yesterday, she had considered its novelty attractive.

Yesterday ! What a remote past yesterday had become ! Why, only yesterday everything she saw had been transfigured by the glamour . . .

As if suddenly startled by some appalling sight, she sprang away from the window, beset by a frantic desire to escape from a place so haunted by the ghost of yesterday—the ghost that gibed and mocked at her travesty of enduring love.

Only a few hours ago she had stood in the dark hall, with her head pressed to the door as she listened in an agony of desolation to a departing footfall that would never return ; and she had convinced herself that her heart was broken ! Yet only now had she found time to remember an episode whose memory should have been a perpetual, absorbing anguish, and the remembrance had returned as a story connected with some other life, some other more faithful heart, belonging to a woman who had long ago died of sorrow.

He was right then. She had forgotten—sooner even than he could have believed possible, perhaps. And more horrible still, she was glad she had forgotten—glad that last night's load of despair could not now threaten to cripple her energies and resolutions. Her heart was as ugly, looked at through disillusioned eyes, as the landscape outside—the heart of a materialist, which could let anxieties as to board and lodging oust all other considerations, could convert yesterday's occurrences into mere trifles when compared with to-day's.

" And I believe I'm thanking Heaven I've only myself to think about now," she told herself

disgustedly. "Is that selfish of me, or is it the most unselfish thought I could have, considering all I know about myself and the worthlessness of my affections? There's only myself to suffer from my failures, or to glory over my successes, and in an isolation like that nothing can really trouble or matter much."

CHAPTER VII

OUTSIDE the pavements, the bare, stunted trees, which at intervals lined either side of the road, and the front-garden railings, shimmered silvery in the moonlight, transfigured by a diamond coating of frost ; and the little dingy, grey-brick houses of Arbour Road appeared almost picturesque with their roofing of frozen snow ; but the cold was intense, and the hard, slippery road was not pleasant walking for wayfarers.

Inside the houses it was not much warmer, even in those where a good fire could be afforded ; but in the first-floor front room of No. 9 there was none, and it was here that Penelope Craddock, muffled in her thickest coat, was kneeling before a half-packed trunk, removing, and curiously investigating, its contents, then, with hands that were blue and almost paralysed with cold, returning them to their former storage.

During the past two and a half years Penelope had suffered a good deal of discomfort, but never anything quite so acute as that which she was now enduring, and which she had endured ever since the hard weather set in a week ago. Some time previous to that she had found herself unable to pay for fuel, and had accordingly decided that the more honest course would be to dispense with a fire ; moreover, her physical trials were being considerably aggravated by mental perturbation.

On this particular evening she was realizing that the climax had approached so near that she would sooner know the worst and get it over than protract the agonies of anticipation. For a month past she had watched and waited for it, recognizing at a long distance off at first, and always fortified by the hope that something might happen to divert its descent upon her. But anticipation had finally become a magnifier of tragedy, more difficult to bear, probably, than the actual reality. Two and a half years ago, she remembered, when Ada Duval and Violet had cast her off, to sink or swim as best she could, no time for the thoughts which engendered despair had been available. And that had been the saving of her ; that and a few other things—for, of course, she had not been penniless then, nor had she been vainly seeking for work until the hopelessness of the quest had disheartened her ; moreover, she was not, in those days, so well acquainted with the world's ways, preferring at that time to see things as she aspired that they should be, until experience revealed her error.

With all the optimism she could muster she was now valiantly striving to convince herself that she was far better off than a great many other people ; and so, during the intervals when she paused to rub the circulation back into her numb fingers, she temporarily restored vigour to her flagging spirits. Undoubtedly a great many had never had any luck, had never known what it was not to feel dispirited ; and there must be a great many more who had someone dependent upon them. What could be worse than that—to see some helpless creature one was fond of suffer on account of one's failure ! Yes, if she had any decency or gratitude at all in her composition

she should remember all her good fortune and be grateful for it. For, till now, she had never really known what actual want was. First there had been her own money, which had provided for her until some time after the conclusion of the course of her training, and until she had obtained a situation as typist in Gilbert & Horne's place in the City. After that, for eighteen months, she had been comfortably enough settled, contriving to earn enough to pay the rent of her combined-room in Arbour Road—the room she had inhabited since the fateful morning of her ejection by Ada Duval—and to supply her modest requirements in the way of food, leaving a few shillings over with which to procure necessary articles of clothing and to pay for boot repairs. When that stunning shock, in the shape of a week's notice, had been delivered a month ago, she had something put by, and those few shillings, though they did not last long, had been extremely useful at the time. Therefore, what business had she to complain, or to bestow an undue amount of pity on her condition? That small amount of money was far better than none at all, for it had paid her expenses during the first week of unemployment. Moreover, if Gilbert & Horne saw the necessity of reducing their staff, what right had she to blame them? They knew their own affairs much better than she did. And if nobody else evinced eagerness to add to their staff or to substitute her for an unsatisfactory member of it—well—it was simply luck, and probably if she'd had less luck in the past she would not be so readily down-hearted now.

A sound from outside suddenly cut short her retrospections, startling her into an unreasonable state of panic that betrayed the condition to which suspense

had reduced her nerves. For no sooner did it reach her than she commenced bundling her belongings into the trunk ; then, shutting it hastily, she scrambled to her feet, casting off the heavy coat and flinging it into concealment behind a dilapidated arm-chair. After having done this, she picked up a magazine and seated herself in the chair with an air of comfort and composure which was not in the least degree likely to delude any intruder who chanced to sniff the frosty atmosphere of her surroundings or to catch a glimpse of her strained and agitated expression.

"Someone to see me, I'll be bound," she muttered beneath her breath. "Just what would happen on the very day it wasn't wanted to."

Then she listened intently, while the someone made a careful ascent of the steps outside, apparently planting each foot with great precision on the slippery stones so as to secure a firm hold. Next she heard a knock, followed by the ringing of a bell in the basement, and after a long interval the door was opened and a dialogue took place, to which she listened with strained attention although she scarcely succeeded in distinguishing a single word. Nevertheless she had distinguished something, for as a gruff rumble responded to the landlady's challenging request for the visitor's name, she uttered a smothered ejaculation of dismay.

"I knew it—I felt it in my bones ! It's Bertie Lembridge." And having assured herself on this point she resumed her pose of absorbed interest in the magazine.

Presently the door opened a few inches and an extremely dissatisfied voice announced,

"There's a gentleman wants to see you."

"Mayn't he come in?" Penelope inquired, looking up with a conciliatory smile, though there was nobody visible to whom it might appeal.

At no other time during her sojourn here would she have hazarded such a suggestion, knowing as she did her landlady's rigid views on the impropriety of receiving gentlemen visitors in combined-rooms; but this evening nothing seemed to matter, so she could venture on recklessness. One additional pretext for her landlady's condemnation would not make the least difference to her ultimate fate.

A grunt was her sole answer, and an instant later a young man pushed the door more fully open, stepped inside, and hastily shut it behind him.

A very insignificant-looking young man he was, of poor physique and nondescript colouring, and wearing an extremely worried expression; the sort of young man one can see by the dozen in the streets of the City at lunch hour, or in the tubes when the day's work is over, one belonging to a type that one recognizes without the faintest sensation of curiosity or interest.

"I thought I'd look you up as it was Saturday and I could get out early," he said, holding out his hand, and, as Penelope jumped up to receive him with a quite fair imitation of cordial welcome, his colourless lips broke into a smile which, for the moment that it lasted, completely separated him from the commonplace by the glimpse of inner excellence which it suddenly revealed in his dull eyes.

But the smile faded almost immediately, to be succeeded by a look of concerned disquietude.

"Good Lord!" he said, his glance shifting from Penelope's face to the empty grate, before she had

time to divert his thoughts by a cheerful response to his greeting: "How cold you are!" Then, as it again returned to her: "So this is how you live when you're alone, is it?" he demanded reproachfully. "Are you——"

"It was awfully nice of you to come," Penelope interrupted hastily, ignoring all but his first remark. "I've been wondering when I'd have time to get out to Norwood to see Mrs. Lembridge and Alice—and you, of course—but somehow I've never been able to manage it yet."

"No," he responded, but he spoke with an air of abstraction, while his eyes roved round the dingy room, the greater part of his attention being obviously bestowed upon their discoveries. "No; it was high time I looked you up and found out why you're hiding yourself away."

A little nervous laugh greeted this remark.

"That's what you've been doing," he insisted severely.

"I'm not hiding," Penelope denied. "I'd simply got business that wouldn't allow me time for paying visits."

As she spoke she retreated to her arm-chair and sat down again, inviting him with a gesture to occupy the only other seat in the room.

"Business!" he echoed, elevating his scarcely perceptible eyebrows in incredulous interrogation. "By the way, I met a girl from Gilbert & Horne's yesterday, and had some talk with her," he added.

"Oh!"

"Speaking of business made me remember it."

The instinct to conceal her discomfiture made Penelope smile broadly, in an attempt to manifest

feelings that were the exact reverse to those she was experiencing.

"Business is a bit slack," she admitted in a tone of much the same quality as the smile.

For a short time Bertie Lembridge was silent, while he scrutinized her suspiciously.

"You've not got another job? Or have you?" he presently inquired.

"Not yet."

"Then what are you doing with yourself?"

"I'm having a holiday."

A look of withering scorn overspread Bertie's face as his gaze left hers to make a second voyage of discovery round the room, finally stopping once more, with a look of fascinated horror and disgust, as it reached the fireless grate. So eloquent was his expression that it could not be misunderstood, and, moreover, so ludicrous that Penelope burst into a laugh of genuine amusement.

"Damned queer sort of holiday," he growled discontentedly.

"Is it? Well, people have different tastes, you know."

"Seems so. Now, if you were at the seaside in weather like this, I suppose you'd be bathing all day?" he inquired scathingly.

"Quite possibly."

"If you'd a thermometer in this room you'd find it was several degrees below freezing point."

"Quite possibly, again—and very healthy, I fancy, for those who can stand cold."

Bertie's gaze flashed back to her face, half appealingly, half resentfully.

"You've no fire," he declared.

"Oh, you clever, observant Bertie! Do you really say you've noticed that?"

"Chuck fooling and be reasonable," he begged. "It's a serious matter. It must mean that you're in a serious way, or you'd have a fire on a night like this."

"Not at all," she returned, with an affectation of indifference. "Though you may enjoy fires, I prefer looking at that gorgeous fire-screen. Now Bertie, did you ever see anything so beautiful as those roses, or the butterflies, three times life size? That screen is the most wonderful work of art I've ever seen, and I'd not be deprived of its fascinations for all the fires in the world."

"Then, all one can think is that you're fit for a lunatic asylum."

"Tut, Bertie; that's rude! Even our lengthy friendship won't stand the strain of anything as ill-mannered as that."

"All the same, it's true. You're not fit to take care of yourself."

"If by 'taking care' you mean supplying myself with unnecessary luxuries, I'm certainly not."

"Fires are necessities."

"Well, Bertie, if you came here solely to cram your opinions down my throat, I think you'd far better have kept away," Penelope declared, suddenly dropping the bantering tone for one of cold reproof.

Instantly his manner underwent a change.

"Don't get offended, dear," he pleaded abjectly. "I didn't come for anything except to know how you were getting on, and when a chap cares for anybody as much as I do for you, he can't help forgetting

himself a bit if he suspects things aren't as right as they should be."

"Then don't suspect, Bertie—or, if you must, always try to hope for the best," she advised. "That's what I do. Only I strongly object to your remark about my being unfit to take care of myself. For years past that's just the thing I've prided myself on being able to do."

"I know you have," he retorted, "but then, as you remarked just now, other people may look on things differently."

"Only if, as in this case, they are ill-informed. If you'd known me when I came to London first, you'd marvel at the way I've managed. In those days I was an ignorant little fool if you like, but I must have had some latent intelligence to have learnt independence at the surprising rate I had to do it at, and without making any very bad blunders either."

"All the same, you have had to live the way you've been doing ever since," he objected stubbornly. "This is no life for a girl who's been brought up in comfort and in a sheltered home."

"Well, there I disagree. For I'm convinced it was uncommonly good for me, and I thank my stars I've not had to waste the last couple of years in a state of blissful unconsciousness of the existence of a world outside my uncle's parish."

"I know you do. But then there always is a more—more suitable life ready for you, if you'd only accept it. When will you be sensible and see that?"

He leaned forward impulsively, his eyes eagerly and earnestly imploring her; and in order to avoid them Penelope shifted her position at once, averting her face.

"I do wish you wouldn't say things like that," she gently reproved him.

"Are you never going to?"

Penelope shook her head.

"No. It's no use asking me. The first time I said 'No' was as final as—as the last."

A rueful smile flickered on Bertie's lips as he drew himself back to his former posture.

"As the twenty-sixth," he corrected. "Had you forgotten the number?"

"No. But, Bertie dear, don't let there ever be a twenty-seventh."

He made a comical gesture of despair.

"Does this not count?" he asked. "Well, so much the better; for it's said that there's luck in odd numbers, which gives one hope that perhaps the real twenty-seventh will be the charm."

"However, now it's indefinitely postponed, let's talk of something else," she suggested, with an heroic attempt at nonchalance. "Let me ransack my larder for a change, and offer you some hospitality after your long pilgrimage, and notwithstanding your rudeness in criticizing my habitation."

It would have appealed to him much more to be allowed to wait upon her, but he nevertheless acquiesced, although reluctantly, compelling himself to watch her movements while, one by one, she produced her stores—cocoa, half a loaf of bread, an almost empty marmalade pot, a small jug of milk, and a few grains of sugar at the bottom of a large glass bowl.

After these had been removed, he noted, with rapidly increasing dismay, that nothing remained on the

shelves of the chiffonier from which she had taken them.

"Penelope, I wish you'd be reasonable and confess the truth," he suddenly broke out, unable, as the last article was placed on the table, to restrain himself longer.

"Truth?" she glanced up with an interrogatory lift of the eyebrows.

"Are you really and truly as hard up as all that?" he blundered on recklessly.

Had the question proceeded from anyone else, Penelope would not have hesitated to denounce it as an impertinence; but Bertie's blunders and presumptions were too frequent, were so well-meant, and so obviously regarded by him as a special privilege to which the twenty-six refusals entitled him, that she had trained herself to control the impulse which prompted her to administer a rebuke.

This particular blunder was, however, decidedly disconcerting; for a truthful answer would undoubtedly make him more troublesome, whereas, to utter a deliberate falsehood was distasteful to her own prejudices. Consequently, the only remaining alternative was to revert to her previous methods of evasion, and to parry his question.

"What makes you insist on thinking that?—For I really believe you've set your mind obstinately on to thinking it?" As she said it she smiled at him with an air of amused mystification.

His only reply was to point a disparaging finger at the repast spread out upon the table.

With a feigned look of interest, which betrayed no hint of the anxiety overshadowing her thoughts, Penelope followed the gesture.

"What's wrong? Oh, I see; you're one of those people who are fanciful about food."

He wheeled round on her suddenly.

"Look here, is that all you've got to put you through the whole of Sunday, and to do for Monday's breakfast?" he demanded, ignoring entirely a charge which might disqualify him as a desirable husband. "Good Lord! Don't tell me you're as broke as that?"

Before attempting to reassure him Penelope hesitated, inwardly anathematizing his faculty for getting her into tight corners.

"I haven't told you," she answered at last, a trifle irritably. "As a rule I wait to do my marketing till late on Saturday evening; things are cheaper then."

"What are you going to get for to-morrow's breakfast?"

For a few seconds she appeared to consider.

"I'll have to consult Mrs. Robins first," she presently explained. "Seeing that she does the cooking she's a right to have a say in the matter, you know. And now, if you can prevail on yourself to honour my humble board, I'll ask for some hot water and make you some quite drinkable cocoa."

When the cocoa had been made Bertie sipped it suspiciously, loth to accord it any commendation. He ate, however, a surprising and alarming amount of bread.

"Are you fond of that kind of loaf?" Penelope inquired, with something that was not exactly solicitude for his comfort, or interest in his tastes, in her anxious tone.

"It's beastly stale," he declared, munching it savagely. "That's why I'm getting rid of it—so that you will be obliged to get yourself some fresh stuff."

For an instant Penelope demurred, eyeing him and the bread dubiously; then, goaded by the realization of the plight to which his considerate forethought might presently reduce her, she leaned forward and pushed the loaf out of his reach.

"When you have tea with people you shouldn't insult their hospitality," she reproved him severely. "Ever since you came you've been extremely rude, and taken quite unjustifiable liberties. Also, you've shocked and disappointed me by showing how wasteful you can be—eating a thing for the sole purpose of getting rid of it is sheer waste, and if you were really sensible you'd know that stale bread is more wholesome as well as more economical than fresh."

"You've no butter," he grumbled, apparently quite unabashed at her remonstrances.

"As I didn't know you were coming I couldn't possibly be prepared. I don't like butter, so I don't get it for myself."

For a few minutes Bertie proceeded with his unpalatable meal without offering any further criticism, but it was evident that he was meditating deeply.

"Oh, why don't you chuck it?" he exploded suddenly.

"If you mean, chuck my present life—well, because I love my liberty."

"Liberty!" Bertie snorted contemptuously. "Precious sort of liberty, to my mind. Tell me—would you love this sort of liberty enough to keep you from marrying *anybody*?"

"Bertie, you'll make me sorry you came, and wish that you'd go away."

"That's wriggling away from my question."

"Isn't it rather audacious of you to ask such a question?"

"Whether you order me out for asking it or not, I'll not go till you've given it some sort of answer. And if you decline to answer, I'll assume——"

He cut himself short suddenly, shutting his mouth with a snap and averting his face lest he should betray the feelings revealed by the pained compression of his lips and the jealousy that smouldered so perceptibly in his eyes. Right well, he knew, she would not order him to go, but he also knew her reason for tolerating his audacity; and the knowledge hurt him. Only because she was sorry for him was he privileged to enjoy her society.

Meanwhile Penelope was shaking her head at him reproachfully.

"Don't be silly, Bertie!" she admonished. "Yes, I'm in love with liberty, and there's not a man on earth for whom I'd part with it. As long as I live I hope to be independent, and to stand on my own legs in preference to using marriage as a support. Besides, while I remain as I am nothing that happens to me can matter much to anybody but myself."

Bertie received this speech with a sound between a grunt and a groan. Nevertheless, the consoling knowledge that he possessed no living human rival, did much towards tempering the bitterness of his feelings. However, he found it necessary to hate and be jealous of something, so, as he fidgeted uneasily under Penelope's mildly reproving gaze, his own avoided it by roving abstractedly around the room, while his thoughts went in quest of relief for his mortification. And after all he found a good deal that merited hatred and jealousy—everything, in

fact, that had to do with Penelope's life, and from which he was excluded ; most of all, her love of independence ; and lastly her friendship with himself that never developed into anything warmer.

"Have you eaten all the bread you want ?" Penelope asked presently, as her companion gave no indication of voluntarily breaking his morose silence. "Or would you like some more cocoa ?"

"Nothing more, thanks."

"Then I think I'll put the things away."

Instantly he bounded to his feet, and seizing the despised loaf and the marmalade almost hurled them out of sight in the recesses of the chiffonier. In the same manner he cleared the whole table within the shortest space of time, his proceedings, however, manifesting less zeal to help than a savage determination to vent his feelings upon something against which he could conscientiously entertain a genuine grievance.

"See here," he said, returning to his seat when the task of clearing the table had been satisfactorily accomplished. "I've thought of something else you could do. Supposing you put a few things together and come back with me this evening ? Mother and Alice would be delighted, and the spare room is always waiting for you if you happen to need it. I won't ask you again why you've no fire here, but I'll just point out to you that it's as much as your life is worth to live without one in this weather ; so that, if you can't run to one, you'd better go where there's no scarcity."

For one single moment, the temptation to accept this offer seemed to Penelope to be more than she had strength to resist. But relentless memory intervened,

reminding her of certain matters which must be dealt with ; so, with an inaudible sigh, she dismissed the alluring vision of a night's comfort. Those matters could not be confided to Bertie. For even if, by so doing, Mrs. Robins should be deprived of a pretext for questioning her honesty and perhaps seriously injuring her reputation, there was her self-respect and her independence which would not reconcile—

Having reviewed the subject thus far Penelope felt too dazed to go further. The landlady's points of view were still too problematical for speculation. Besides, nothing very dreadful was likely to happen ; nothing ever did.

"It's awfully kind of you," she said. "But I don't think I could manage it this week-end. Next, perhaps—if the invitation's still open. Would that do as well for you ?"

"No, it won't. You may be an iceberg by then," he answered gruffly.

Penelope breathed another sigh, this time quite audibly.

"Then I suppose the subject's at an end," she murmured in a tone of mild regret.

"No, it's *not*," Bertie contradicted emphatically. Then, with a gesture of despair : "Oh, Lord ! you'll drive me mad !" he groaned. "Am I never to have things my own way ? Well, then, if it's all I can get out of you, promise to come next Saturday afternoon. I'll tell mother, so there'll be no need for her to write, and we'll call it settled. Will that do ?"

"Ye—es," she assented abstractedly ; then, as if with an effort, she roused herself to add in a more sprightly tone : "Thanks awfully. You're really very kind, and I don't deserve it one bit."

"As you've nothing else to do you might turn up in the morning. Mother will be alone, but I'm sure she'd like to have you."

"But I can't be sure about having nothing to do," Penelope objected, hope once more struggling within her for a fresh, though momentary, lease of life. "So we'll settle the afternoon. And now, Bertie, though I don't want to turn you out, I'm inclined to think Mrs. Robins will begin to get restless if you stay much longer."

This reminder instantly brought him to his feet.

"Aren't you going out shopping?" he remarked, his eyes wandering vindictively to the chiffonier behind whose door the offending loaf and marmalade pot were hidden. "If that's so, we can walk a bit of the way together, can't we?"

So much did the unexpectedness of this proposal startle Penelope that she scarcely retained the presence of mind to conceal the consternation and embarrassment it occasioned.

"No—oh, no—I'm sorry," she stammered.

Expostulations and arguments were inevitable, she knew, so whilst awaiting them she gathered her wits hastily together in order to be prepared with an adequate defence, realizing all the time that no excuse she could offer would carry the least conviction to the mind of its recipient.

But to her surprise he did not attempt to argue. On the contrary, he appeared either to have paid no attention to her rejection of his proposal, or else to have decided to accept it without comment. For, as he furtively turned his face towards her, there was no foreshadowing of aggressive intentions in its expression; instead, it struck her as curiously shy and embarrassed.

Presently his right hand, which had been indulging in unaccountable, spasmodic jerks and twitches, made a sudden and more determined movement, and burrowed down into his trousers pocket. At first Penelope wondered if the whole of him craved for concealment, and if the hand, discovering itself to be the only part of his obviously embarrassed person that had an opportunity of doing so, was availing itself of the nearest refuge. But, a second later, the jingle of coins roused fresh surmises, and, with a heart that seemed suddenly to fail her, she braced herself to envisage a new and hitherto unanticipated form of discomfiture.

"I say," he mumbled hoarsely, his kind, honest eyes speaking with much more eloquence than his faltering tone. "Just this once, dear—just to give me a little bit of pleasure—will you—will you let me pay for—for a little treat for your—for your dinner to-morrow?"

As he concluded his halting request he withdrew the hand, now full of silver and copper coins.

Tears sprang to Penelope's eyes. Nevertheless, for his own sake, she could not let him know how his action affected her, so she puckered her forehead into an indignant frown and gave her head an emphatic shake of displeased negation.

"Well, if you won't, don't be angry at my offering; I didn't mean it nastily," he pleaded, hastily restoring the despised gift as if he were desirous to withdraw it from view without an instant's delay. "And you'll come to us next Saturday—for sure—won't you?"

With a sense of relief she realized that he had forgotten his suggestion to accompany her on the mythical shopping expedition; or else, because he feared augmented disquietude in witnessing possibly drastic

economy, he had availed himself of this chance to abandon the project by pretending he had forgotten.

"Yes, I'll come on Saturday—for sure," she reassured him cheerfully. "I'll turn up gladly—always provided we're both in the land of the living, and that all goes well."

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER Bertie Lembridge had departed, and she had thoroughly satisfied herself that he was safely out of the vicinity and not likely to return, Penelope resumed the occupation which his inopportune visit had interrupted.

First of all she retrieved the coat from its concealment behind the chair and again wrapped herself in it; then, re-opening the battered old trunk, she recommenced emptying it of its contents with feverish haste, separating them, and returning all the clothes and bulkier articles, leaving the smaller things scattered on the floor to await further investigation.

"Nothing that's of very much use, I'm afraid. And, anyway, if she does fire me out she's not likely to let me take parcels away," she reflected disconsolately, as she pored over the small pile of rubbish. "I've not a single thing left that's worth selling, and there's nothing eatable here, so I suppose these had better all go back with the rest."

She gave a little rueful laugh, then compressed her lips tightly as if to stifle some other and less philosophical expression of feeling.

But it was even really not much use to try to persuade herself that her present predicament was less hard to bear than the one which, so long ago, had compelled her to stand alone before she was ready, and when

she was so miserably tired in body and hurt in mind. Present afflictions had a way of always appearing much worse than those that were past and only dimly remembered. Moreover, during the month preceding that first ejection, hope had not received such a merciless shower of blows as it had lately suffered.

All the same, life, in all its phases, was intensely interesting, she reminded herself—interesting even when it proved nothing better than an arduously sustained effort to keep body and soul together. The habit of living only from day to day, of never knowing what it was to possess a penny more than, with economy, would procure board and lodging for one week, was excitingly interesting too, and excellent, no doubt, for developing one's intelligence and self-reliance. Yes, assuredly she ought to be grateful for a life of comparative hardship, as it was undoubtedly more interesting than one of ease and prosperity.

Nevertheless, when the thought that Mrs. Robins must suffer for her impecuniosity recurred to her, she came very near to regretting having so emphatically declined even a trifling loan from Bertie Lembridge.

It was decidedly harassing to realize that not only was her purse empty, but that she had already disposed of every saleable article she possessed, and still owed four weeks' rent, which, in her optimism, she had promised to pay to-night. For, being unable to pay, she must now consider herself dishonest; and how much more mortifying it was to claim such a character than to anticipate the accusations of Mrs. Robins; how much worse, moreover, than to have to puzzle over the problem as to how she should live when once

publicly branded with it. On the whole, Mrs. Robins had been very patient, very confiding, and the disappointment of her pecuniary losses would assuredly be aggravated when she realized how she had been deceived, how her patience had been wasted and her confidence misplaced.

A look of desperation overspread Penelope's face as she thought of this, and with almost panic-stricken haste she recommenced to fling the remainder of the rubbish back into the trunk ; then something suddenly attracted her attention, and she paused to pick it up that she might subject it to a closer inspection.

" Oh-h-h ! " She uttered a low laugh—the tender, pitying, yet mocking laugh reserved for memories of bygone follies.

In her hand was a white cardboard box, tied with a large blue satin ribbon.

" Anyhow, these may be eatable—at least, I hope they are," she decided ; but she fingered the box reverently, much as if it were some relic exhumed from the grave of a long-lost friend. Then she laughed again, this time with unqualified amusement. " Lucky I used to be such a sentimental little owl, and luckier still that I'm not sentimental now," she added. " For I'll hide these away, and if the worst comes to the worst they may put me through a crisis. Who knows but the nameless man was inspired by my guardian angel to give me these."

No longer had she the least desire to regard that box as so sacred a relic that it might serve no practical purpose. Indeed, she no longer felt that it had even been bestowed upon *her*, but upon another girl, who, with dazzled eyes, had once gazed out on life through the glorifying haze of inexperience, and had then

mysteriously faded out of existence, killed by the poignant anguish of her subsequent disillusionment. The girl, who saw most things by the revealing glare which had accompanied the death agony, was a new Penelope, bearing only an outward resemblance to the victim of that tragedy.

If only it had been Bertie's smile which had kindled that strange flame of love in the vanished girl's soul ! If only Bertie had appeared sooner !—serious, sincere, good little Bertie. Why had it not been he ? Why had he delayed until his sister Alice, a chance acquaintance of the new Penelope's, had brought her home and introduced her to the Lembridge family ? His smile might have accomplished quite as much, then, as anyone else's—for it was quite an attractive smile—and his interest in her affairs would probably have appeared quite as flattering as that of the other man. Poor little Bertie, what a kingdom he might have secured had the fates not conspired to keep him late !

What a difference it would have made. With Bertie as an accepted lover she need never have tasted disillusionment, she might have lived on illusions all her life—lived in unswerving confidence that love is immutable, and never learnt to regard herself as a shallow materialist, whose attempt at achieving sublime sentiment had been devastated by the anticlimax of material considerations which had overwhelmed her at the very moment when she was morbidly preparing to gloat over the lacerated fragments of a broken heart.

But she knew herself as a materialist now—a selfish, self-seeking materialist, who might just as well acknowledge frankly that it was solely the thought of material

benefits which had caused her to consider Bertie as an eligible substitute for Penelope's fairy-tale prince.

"What a beast I must be!" she decided, with a sudden twinge of remorse. "And what an escape Bertie's really had! I'd have made him miserable as soon as the novelty of his smile and his kindness had worn off, and then I'd have had a worse disillusioning shock when, besides finding out the mistake I'd made about my feelings, I discovered I'd spoilt two lives by confusing gratitude with something else. After that I'd probably grow irritable with disappointment, and quarrel with every one all round. No, liberty's best for people like me—people who haven't much temperament, or any depth of emotions, or any real feelings about anything but their own physical well-being. And even if I really did care for Bertie enough to sacrifice my liberty for him, there's the mother and sister, who'd make me reconsider the notion and give it up. No, the best I can do for Bertie is never to . . ."

But a heavy tread on the stairs leading up from the basement opportunely recalled Penelope to the exigencies of the present moment. And as, at the sound, she quickly shut the trunk and thrust the chocolate box, which had occasioned this lapse into abstraction, under her coat, Bertie and his merciful escape slipped from her mind.

Before the landlady's ascent of the stairs had been accomplished, she was sitting once more in the arm-chair, looking as if she had not stirred out of it since her visitor's departure.

First, possibly as a warning to her lodger to be in readiness to receive her, Mrs. Robins rattled the tin

tray she was carrying against the door, but she did not wait for any bidding to enter.

Penelope watched her entrance anxiously, noting with a sinking heart that her lips were set in ominously inflexible lines, that her bearing rather suggested a combination of jailor, policemen, and bailiff, and that she deposited a black account-book on the table with a snap which said as plainly as any words, "Pay up, or clear out."

However, as the lodger gave no indication of being aware of the presence of the account-book, Mrs. Robins was obliged, after first placing it conspicuously in the centre of the table, to push it towards her in a manner that made it no longer possible that it could be overlooked.

"Four weeks owin'," she remarked laconically.

This was an entirely superfluous reminder, for only too well did Penelope know that it would make no difference whatsoever whether she examined the book or not—that it was an uncontrovertible fact that she had lived on credit for four whole weeks, and a fact, moreover, of which she was thoroughly ashamed. Nevertheless, she now picked it up and scrutinized it thoughtfully and interestedly. To be able to appear absorbed in something was a relief; and the book, though scarcely reassuring, was less unnerving than the denunciation in Mrs. Robins' eyes.

So, for several minutes, Penelope studied it, shutting it at last with a reluctant air of finality, and then handing it back to her creditor.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she began, drawing herself up to confront Mrs. Robins, and looking her full in the face with eyes that were not only remorseful but undoubtedly honest. "I've not got the money yet,

and I know I'd no business to go on running the account for so long when I'd nothing to pay it with. You can believe me or not—just as you like—but I've really done my utmost to find work, and if I hadn't felt hopeful of getting it I wouldn't have gone on staying here. A month ago, I paid you my last week's salary ; and since then I've pawned my watch, which was the only valuable I had, so as to be able to buy food and to pay bus fares to the different places where I thought I'd get taken on. At the present moment I've only threepence left, and that's no good to offer to anybody. However, I'm sure of work—quite sure of it soon, for I know it only takes time to find it and that I'll do that if I persevere—so perhaps you could trust me a little longer ? I wouldn't ask that, unless . . .”

Her voice faltered and died away in a tremulous little gasp. It had been hard enough to proceed thus far, and had required an almost superhuman effort to frame her concluding request, but determination and fortitude could carry her no further when Mrs. Robins's face had already answered her, compelling her to realize the utter hopelessness of her case.

“A poor woman can't live on promises like them,” the landlady retorted sharply. “You may be well-meanin', and you may not, but yer good intentions won't 'elp a Christian to live, bein', as they say, the pavin' stones of the place w'ere thieves and swindlers go w'en they've done livin' on their wits and at other people's expense. Wot property you've got you'll 'ave to leave 'ere, Miss Craddock, for it b'longs to me till yer comes with the cash to redeem it ; meantime, yer'll 'ave to get out of this yerself and make room for me to put a *payin'* lodger into the apartment.”

Penelope was neither astounded nor offended by

this plain speaking, or at the sentence passed on her. Mrs. Robins, she recognized, was quite justified in all she said and was about to do. Neither, strangely enough, was she very much appalled by the prospects before her; for, luckily for her own peace of mind, she had to a certain extent schooled herself not to look too searchingly ahead—a very useful training for those who can earn only a bare sufficiency for present needs.

"Indeed, I couldn't expect you to look at it any other way," she said humbly. "And I suppose you'd like me to go first thing on Monday morning."

"No." Mrs. Robins enunciated this negative in a tone which seemed sternly to forbid any further discussion on the subject. "No, I'll tell you straight, I'll not 'ave you eatin' at my expense till Monday, nor will I 'ave you starvin' 'ere on my 'ands neither. I'm a 'ard-workin' woman with a reputation to keep up, and I can't afford free feeds to folks, no more than I can scandals. 'Owsomever, I'm a religious woman, too, and am set against business on Sundays, pleasant or unpleasant, so that stops me puttin' you out to-morrer. Wot 'as to be done is for you to clear out this night, and no breakin' of the Sabbath—clear out now, w'ile I'm standin' 'ere to see yer don't smuggle out any of those things that's mine by rights."

"What!" Penelope started to her feet, consternation making her monosyllabic utterance sound like a strangled shriek of terror.

"You may be thankful I'm not 'avin' yer put in jug as I've every reason to do, and as yer richly deserves," Mrs. Robins resumed, with implacable severity. "Bear that in mind, and let it make you look slippy about gettin' under way, will yer? If

yer'd try to look at things fair yer'd see soon enough that I'm treatin' yer a sight better than I need, so on with yer coat and 'at, and let this be the last time I 'as to tell yer."

Mechanically and in silence Penelope obeyed, buttoning up the coat, which she already wore, and fetching her hat from the wardrobe. By the sudden turn events had taken she felt too utterly stunned, and too abjectly humiliated by the criticism of her conduct as given by the landlady, to desire or feel equal to any further protest.

Moreover, she was still striving to acknowledge that Mrs. Robins was well within her rights, and she was even beset by some misgivings as to whether she had infringed upon these by depriving her of the few pence which the coat and hat might realize at a pawn office. However, it was freezing hard outside, so that a wrap of some sort was indispensable unless she intended to die of cold, therefore, despite all conscientious scruples, it could not be relinquished.

"Wot's in that pocket?" Mrs. Robins' eye fixed on it suspiciously.

Following the direction of her questioner's look, Penelope glanced down, and noticed how the coat bulged at one side; then she thrust her hand into the pocket and withdrew a white cardboard box.

"This," she said, submissively holding it out for investigation.

Mrs. Robins snatched it from her and with ruthless hands tore off the ribbon and removed the lid, then paused to stare in contemptuous wonder at the strangely unappetizing sweetmeats thus exposed to view.

"The ashbin's the place for them," she pronounced disparagingly, handing back the box after the briefest

inspection. "Looks as if they'd bin in that there pocket since the deluge and got blue-mouldy by falling out of the ark by mistake afore the rain stopped."

"Thank you," Penelope said meekly, as she received back to her own safe keeping the despised memento of sentimental days.

Then, with an impressively dramatic gesture, Mrs. Robins flung the door wide open; and her erstwhile lodger passed out into the narrow passage hall without another word, unlatched the front door for herself, and disappeared into the cold and darkness of the night.

CHAPTER IX

"WELL, I'm up against it now with a vengeance, and no mistake," Penelope told herself, with a valiant attempt at cheerfulness, as she walked down the slippery frost-covered road. "There's the whole blessed night to be got through, and, as ill-luck will have it, I believe it's the very coldest night I've ever known. Then, after it, comes Sunday—the worst day of the week for people in my position—a day that'll have to be spent loafing about, I suppose, marking time until next morning and the chance of *begging* for work. Loafing in this weather! Oh, well!"

At the bottom of the road she stopped, debating which way to go.

Having lodged with Mrs. Robins ever since leaving Eglantine Villas, Shepherd's Bush was the locality with which she was most familiar; and she now gazed uncertainly up and down the noisy Uxbridge Road, hesitating whether to go townwards, or to turn west in the direction of Acton and Ealing. However, after a momentary demur, she finally decided on town. To separate herself from it by a few extra miles, she reflected, might be injudicious, and might result in confronting her with the mortifying discovery that weariness and an empty purse had made an ill-advised decision irrevocable.

Whilst turning these questions over in her mind

she fumbled in her pockets, with a view to ascertaining the exact extent of her resources. There was the chocolate-box, of course ; and it required no further reconnoitring. Of the contents of the purse also, she was only too well informed ; but in the left-hand pocket it was satisfactory to discover some hitherto unexplored property. Over this, as she dived down her hand drawing forth a collection of miscellaneous articles, she grew quite excited and elated, and forthwith fell to examining them by the light of the street lamp.

Two soiled pocket handkerchiefs ; a large button, apparently belonging to the coat she was wearing ; half a " Marie " biscuit, no longer crisp, but still eatable and even palatable provided she was hungry enough not to be too fastidious ; some strips of stamp-paper and a small roll of string ; a packet containing one " Wild Woodbine " cigarette, and a box with two or three matches in it. That was the whole extent of her worldly wealth—not so very great, perhaps, but better than nothing at all, especially when one was determined to make the very best of things one could.

After investigating these with obvious appreciation, she ate the piece of biscuit, transferred the cigarette and matches to the pocket which held the chocolate-box, and returned the rest to the one in which she had found them.

" I might be a lot worse off," she reminded herself. " And a smoke in some quiet corner will probably be a great comfort, if I find the night too long and get anyway nervy."

In another matter also she was certainly fortunate—that self-pity was such a stranger to her that it could

not create an aggravation to her discomforts. During two and a half years in which liberty had actually represented little else than a prolonged effort to keep destitution at bay—two and a half years during which her golden visions of success had dropped lower and lower behind her mental horizon—it had never once occurred to her to rail against the destiny which decreed that her lot should be harder than that of others who had appeared less persistent and persevering. For her simple theory had ever been that misfortunes unshared were misfortunes lightly borne.

After carefully bestowing her possessions in their repositories, she faced eastward, walking quickly so as to keep warm, and also because haste promoted an encouraging belief that she had some definite object in view, though what exactly it was she had for the time no clear recollection. Presently, however, she became conscious of a really acute hunger, and commenced reproaching herself bitterly for her folly in hoarding the stale loaf in order to provide for a breakfast of which she was not destined to partake.

At all events, there was threepence in the purse ! And unless she spent it pretty soon all the shops would be shut, leaving her probably to endure increasing pangs of hunger all through the night.

This reflection prompted her at once to seek a cheap teashop, at which she ordered a cup of tea, price twopence, and one penny roll ; and whilst fortifying herself with these she now fell to pondering her chances of securing shelter for the night.

Was there anybody to whom she could apply ?

One by one she passed each of her acquaintances in review, and rejected each in turn as unsuitable. Her

few intimacies had been among girls situated much like herself, and on these she could not prevail on herself to add any expense—little as that might be, it would be more than they could afford, and no matter how readily given it might reduce them to serious financial difficulties. Then who else was there?—Violet? Since leaving Eglantine Villas she had seen portraits of Lady Vendeston in illustrated papers, but had never encountered her cousin in the flesh. Moreover, even had she the desire or audacity to beg assistance from that quarter, Violet would undoubtedly disown such a shabby relation. Nor on Ada Duval need she bestow a single, speculative thought. Even if she contrived to discover Ada's whereabouts, it was scarcely likely she would obtain as much as a word of sympathy for her plight. Advice, possibly, might be volunteered, but it would not be of a kind to which she cared to listen, much less to accept.

"The long and the short of the matter is that I've the strongest objection to asking anybody for anything, and it's so rooted in me that nothing, I believe, will pull it out," she ended by telling herself consolately. "I've never forgotten the soreness I felt when they told me at the Rectory that I'd been a 'burden' on them that must be removed as soon as I was old enough to support myself, and I've never got over the shock of discovering that Violet never wanted me and felt nothing about getting rid of me. All that's worked into me, and made me morbidly afraid of being beholden to anyone for anything, and it was simply that silly feeling that made me refuse Bertie's offer this evening."

And now, with a sudden revealing shock, she was realizing also that she would willingly, gratefully

accept even Bertie's twenty-seventh offer of marriage. That she would do anything on earth to avert the horror of a night spent alone in the streets of London.

But now it was too late: it was no use thinking about it. Bertie was out of reach at the one moment when his presence was urgently required; and, were he ever to find out what he had missed, his distress would undoubtedly be very much more acute than hers.

Not only was it impossible to recall him, but, with a scarcely conceivable lack of forethought, she had spent the threepence which could otherwise have assisted her part of the way towards his home at Norwood. What an idiot she had been! Well—it was done now, so it couldn't be helped.

There was only one thing left for her to do—to face the inevitable with every ounce of fortitude she possessed; to overcome the terrors of anticipation which were thronging upon her conjectures as to the agonies, both of body and mind, she might have to endure—fatigue, hunger, fears of every description, which must accompany wanderings in the streets after the respectable population were safe in their beds.

Accordingly, she set herself to the task of striving to divert her mental activities upon an effort to control and soothe the shuddering horror with which she regarded the inhospitable pavements along which she must tramp alone in the dead of night.

After all, could she not easily rest and find refuge by trespassing on somebody's doorstep?

"I'm standing alone now, and no two ways about it," she decided ruefully, "and doing it with nothing at all but my two legs to support me!"

The roll she had eaten was not very satisfying, so she opened the chocolate-box and sampled its contents. These, however, proved nauseous to a quite inconceivable degree, so much so that she was induced to consider starvation to be preferable to a repetition of this experiment, and possibly less disastrous in its results. Even the one mouldy morsel she ventured to taste made her feel decidedly uncomfortable.

Consequently, when she got up to pay her bill, the box was left behind as a legacy to the waitress.

It was only a little after seven o'clock when she quitted the teashop, so she calculated that, at the very least, she must do twelve hours of aimless walking before the park gates opened and she was permitted to rest her weary limbs upon a bench. Again her heart sank; and, strive as she would, the trials ahead loomed terrifying and hideous in her imagination. She began to recall every ghastly story she had ever heard—Mrs. Robins had so often regaled her with descriptions and warnings of the perils which might beset a woman alone in the streets at night.

Nevertheless, she set her teeth and walked resolutely on—on, and on, and on, first along streets that were familiar, then along others that were strange even in name. While the shops were still open she preferred the main thoroughfares on account of their light and the idea of warmth and cheerfulness it gave, and because the throng of passers-by brought her a sense of security which she lost in deserted places, more especially when the footfall of some other solitary wayfarer sounded in the distance behind her, echoing through the loneliness, sinister and alarming.

But as the hours passed and the shops put up their shutters she deliberately sought the residential quarters, feeling now as if these represented a less desolate solitude. There was a small amount of comfort to be derived from the reflection that behind the drawn blinds ordinary, sophisticated people were sleeping. Moreover, as it grew late, she had been accosted several times in the more frequented regions, and here the sound of an isolated step carried so far that she could get sufficient warning of anyone's approach to enable her to hide in a doorway before the other prowler hove in sight and until he had safely passed by.

But she was growing very tired, and the gnawing of hunger was almost unbearable. Moreover, she was bitterly cold, and when fatigue at last obliged her to reduce her pace to a lethargic saunter, the pain of her half-frozen feet became acute. Presently she tried the cigarette, in the hope of obtaining solace therefrom, but the first mouthful of smoke she inhaled made her light-headed and shaky, so instead of smoking the remainder she warmed her numb fingers at the glowing end.

"I'm in much the same plight as Hans Andersen's match girl," she reflected sadly, and forthwith lighted another match. But nothing happened. No vision of a roast goose loomed through the darkness behind any of the drawn blinds, no glittering Christmas-tree appeared to cheer her; and before its warmth could penetrate the frozen surface of her fingers the tiny blaze had flickered out.

Should she light the others—all in a bunch, like the child in the story? And if she did, would Heaven take note of her pathetic action and send some

apparition from the spirit-world to pilot her safely into those realms of everlasting comfort and peace?

At the thought she shuddered convulsively.

"No—no—no!" she muttered with chattering teeth. "I don't want that! I want to go on—to live—to see what happens!"

With the energy of desperation she moved on more quickly, now seeking distraction in self-reproach.

"Why, oh why, did I let Bertie go like that?" she asked herself resentfully. "Simply because I'm a fool, and an obstinate fool, which is the worst of all. I'd no better reason than a silly, pig-headed objection to accepting help. Well, if I can't help myself, and don't want to die, I must accept charity from somewhere. And he'd have been glad if I'd made a clean breast of the whole business to him—he'd have been happier than I've ever made him before—so it was selfish of me, too, and I deserve all I'm getting now for having been such a pig."

But then, on the other hand, Bertie was poor, so perhaps it was better as it was. Bertie's purse was only very meagrely lined with a bank clerk's salary, most of which was already required to pay his share in the upkeep of the little house at Norwood.

"All the same, I've no right to be squeamish, and it's not to be wondered at that I don't get on if I wait for everything to drop into my mouth unasked for," she resumed severely, having dismissed Bertie as a person of whom she was unworthy even to think. "Probably a just Providence has placed me like this for the purpose of teaching me a useful lesson. Certain it is, that I don't much care what I do or what happens, so long as I can manage to get something to eat, a fire

to warm myself at, and a seat that I can rest on without the fear of getting frozen to it."

Again she stopped, shivering from head to foot, her teeth rattling together, but feeling too exhausted to sustain the effort of this endless tramping. Then she dragged herself a few yards further and paused once more. It was horrible; it was unendurable—or very nearly so; and yet, even in the midst of her acute sufferings, she had time to perceive and be interested in the effect her experiences were having upon her moral feelings. She now made the discovery that an absence of the ordinary accessories to physical well-being could accomplish a revolution among morals and cause the strongest prejudices to vanish.

"It simply shows how absurd and unjust it is for anyone with a full stomach to criticise the conduct of those whose stomachs are empty," she mused bitterly. "Until a person's tempted they can't possibly know how soon fortitude will give way and carry the highest principles with it. Nobody who hasn't tried it could possibly conceive the superhuman heroism that's needed to undergo ordeals like this without some serious mishap to one's respectability."

She turned and looked behind her, then all around, and made a sound like a little choking gasp.

"And I'm not superhumanly heroic, and don't want to be," she said, speaking aloud, in a queer, squeaky voice that surprised herself by its unlikeness to any other voice she had ever heard. "And I don't care a hang for principles or prejudices—I don't care for anything except warmth and food. I'd do *any* thing for those—bind myself to slavery for the rest of my life—for the everlasting future—just to get those in the present and to put an end to this. I

swear solemnly now—I take a solemn oath—that if anyone comes past me within the next few minutes I'll *beg* for charity—beg it from a stranger and not give a thought to the humiliation."

Suddenly her attitude became tense, and she held her breath and listened, standing perfectly motionless, and clinging to an area-railing for support, whilst with eyes that had taken a strangely wild expression, half-shrinking, half-desperate, she strove to pierce the darkness in front of her.

Yes, it was a step!

"I've taken an oath—yes, I've taken an oath, and I can't go back on it," her quivering lips reiterated, as though challenging the terror in her eyes.

"Oh, if it were only Bertie Lembridge! If God would but perform such a miracle—would inspire Bertie to tramp the streets at this hour and in this locality!"

With an effort Penelope swallowed some choking obstruction in her throat, shivered convulsively, and then, with a sudden spurt of energy traversed the footpath, stopping and taking up a position beneath a gas-lamp, while her eyes still strained fixedly in the direction whence the approaching footfalls sounded. The light from the lamp now shone full on her face, and her entire aspect solicited observation.

A moment later, a dark figure—but certainly not that of Bertie Lembridge—became discernible, advancing towards her at a brisk pace. Still with fascinated, horror-stricken eyes Penelope watched it, her desire now being to run away, yet rooted to the spot by the paralysing effect of terror, and quite unable to detach her gaze from the approaching form. For the present, the man's eyes appeared to be bent

on the ground, but she knew he must look up as soon as he came abreast of her; and then . . . and then?

"I've taken an oath—I've taken an oath!" she repeated, and the thumping of her heart beat time to the words. "If I go back on it I'll have to die—and—and anything's better than death when one's principles have been starved out of one."

But when she spoke to him, what would the stranger think? What would he say, what would he do? Surely, this torture of agonized speculation was a punishment for her moral degeneration, for her poor-spiritedness in not patiently enduring a little privation!

He was so close now. Would he stop, or would he pass her by?

"I've taken an oath," she repeated fiercely.

And, as her heart prayed passionately that he might pass by, he stopped.

Simultaneously her heart seemed also to stop. Although she had taken a vow to beg from the first passer-by, she now realized that she had no voice with which to utter her supplication—that now the moment for speech had arrived she was capable only of palpitating terror, and a consciousness that, even were the craving which had goaded her into this situation a hundred times more acute, her physical condition made its verbal expression impossible. But that craving had now more than half surrendered to an instinct to rush away—to rush to the farthest ends of the earth rather than to remain where she might realize more disastrously the folly and weakness which had cast her in the path of a man who, in all likelihood, was some prowling specimen of the sinister

type so often and so luridly described to her by Mrs. Robins.

Meanwhile, the prowling specimen was not only returning her petrified stare, but had halted directly in front of her, obviously for the sole purpose of doing so with greater ease. Furthermore, when even this did not appear wholly to satisfy him, he strode close up to her, and to the unutterable horror of the fascinated quarry, seized her chin in his right hand and tilted her face so that the rays of the lamp should fall more completely upon it.

His touch seemed to scorch her, making her tingle and burn with indignation, and yet numbing her into powerlessness just as the cruel cold had done ; so she had to submit to it ; resistance or protest was out of the question.

"I vowed to beg from the first comer." Her thoughts tortured her with the recollection. "And now I've forfeited my self-respect like that, what right have I to mind. But then why don't I beg—why can't I speak? Oh, what a despicable coward I am!"

So, in the end, it was the prowler who was the first to speak.

"A little thinner perhaps, and a little older, but certainly the same face."

Although this speech was muttered scarcely above his breath, Penelope caught the words and was startled and amazed by their unexpectedness. Then, while her fascinated gaze still refused to obey her will and turn elsewhere, she realized that this man's way of returning it, and of touching her, was quite unexpected also. In some inexplicable manner both suggested that, to him, she was not a creature of flesh and blood,

not really a living thing at all. But neither in look, speech, nor manner was there the least trace of the deliberate familiarity and indignity she had been dreading.

Inconceivable though it appeared, it was evident that there was something about her face—pinched by the cold and haggard from exhaustion as it must be—which undoubtedly attracted and interested this man ; and with an extraordinary absence of self-consciousness he had stopped to investigate it at close quarters.

This notion was decidedly grotesque ; yet, as it presented itself, another equally absurd occurred to her. Should she charge him the price of a meal and a night's lodging for allowing him to study her like that ?

As she thought of this she broke into an uncontrollable peal of hysterical laughter.

" Confound it ! What made you do that ? "

Instantly the hand dropped from her chin, and the rapt expression left his eyes, to be replaced by one of irritated impatience.

" I was thinking I would charge you a penny a peep for whatever it is you're staring at," Penelope explained with hysterical tremulousness. " What is it—my nose or mouth or eyes—that made you behave so funnily ? Or have I frozen somewhere and turned a queer colour ? "

" It's the face I've been hunting for—all my life, I think."

Penelope leaned back against the lamp-post. [The reckless excitement which had made her momentarily forgetful of physical suffering had now worn itself out, and she once more felt limp and dizzy and nerveless.

"All the same, you'd no right to treat my face like that," she muttered, yet unconsciously accepting the situation as a matter of course, and subjecting her part in it to no very severe criticism.

"I beg your pardon. For a second I forgot what I was about, and let myself be deluded into thinking that it had been put there deliberately for me to find."

Again an inclination to laugh assailed Penelope, and she felt too weak to resist it.

"But it's *my* face, you know. It belongs to me, and is stuck on to me, so that we can't be detached without serious injury to both of us!" she gurgled foolishly. "That's why you should pay me for taking such liberties with it."

"I should be only too delighted to pay for a loan of it."

"A loan of it? But I can't take it off; besides, if you want it to attach to yourself I think you'll be dreadfully disappointed, for it won't suit you a bit, won't even fit properly. Not that I care about that, or what you do with it—so long as the bargain is struck quickly and the loan paid for—otherwise it will be a starved, frozen, dead face, and someone will be sure to pounce on it in the morning and shove it into a pauper's grave, in case the public should object to finding it propped up against a lamp-post in a respectable street."

As she made this ghastly prediction a look of consternation came into the eyes which, for a single moment, had not ceased to devour the face in question with a hungry gaze.

"If you're starving and frozen, why don't you go home? Why are you here?"

"Because I haven't a home. I'm here because I've got to loaf about until the parks are opened and I can get a seat to freeze upon in peace. And—and I was getting to feel I could stand the wretchedness no longer, so I deliberately waited here to waylay and beg from the first passer-by."

At this deplorable revelation the man's eyes blazed suddenly with a flash of excited eagerness; and as she concluded it he sprang forward and again laid hands on her, this time grasping her roughly by the shoulder.

"Then it was predestined! In some way you were directed here—some subconscious knowledge, some instinct, brought you to this spot to wait till I found you!"

"Except that I was famished, I'd no knowledge, nor any instinct except to get relief somehow. And I didn't care who found me, so long as it was someone. . . ."

"No matter, when you're what I want—what I've been looking for," her new acquaintance interrupted before she had time to explain that he did not in the very least resemble the person *she* had hopelessly longed to encounter. "Your face, I mean, is what I want—is all I care about—and it shan't escape me again. It's nearly three years since I last saw it and vowed I'd not let it go if ever it came my way again. And now it's mine at last."

"So you took a vow, too?" She looked up at him half wondering, half pityingly. She was still afraid, but no longer of him. Instead, a new terror had assailed her quivering nerves that they might both be helpless victims of a mischievous game played by the fates—that they had been foredoomed to be robbed of all control of their actions and destinies.

The man, however, paid no attention to her question. But his hands had dropped from her shoulders, one only now gripping her by an arm, compelling her to maintain an upright position, steadying her and urging her to exertion.

"You are coming with me," he remarked, apparently with perfect confidence in her acquiescence.

CHAPTER X

HALF an hour later Penelope was sitting before a blazing fire with a bowl of hot soup balanced on her knees.

"If you're starving, as you say, you'd better not eat too much to begin with," George Dufferin cautioned her. "And I may as well warn you that, if you're in the habit of starving, I should prefer that you don't eat more than is absolutely necessary at any time while you're here. Your face, as it is now, is exactly what I want, but there's no knowing how self-indulgence might effect it."

"So, for fear I should get too fat, I must restrain my appetite."

"Yes," he affirmed, with perfect seriousness.

By dint of plying him with questions she had discovered his name and that he was an artist—the latter fact affording her some explanation of his interest in her face, though scarcely, to her mind, justifying his manner regarding it. His interest in herself, however, appeared to confine itself entirely to her upper extremity, for he had not evinced the smallest curiosity as to who, or what, she was. Scarcely did he seem even to associate her face with the rest, as it certainly was entitled to be, or to recognize it as her own property, but rather as an inspiring subject for a masterpiece, which by some perverse and exasperating chance had got attached to her, although,

by right of his adequate appreciation of it, he was the lawful owner ; a thing he begrudged her bitterly, and her callous treatment of which provoked his condemnation. Grotesque though it was, there could be no doubt that he regarded her as two distinctly separate entities—the one wholly desirable and worthy of every care that could be bestowed upon it, the other barely tolerable, a thing that it was preferable to ignore, if such a course were feasible.

So little, indeed, did he appear to consider the second entity that it had evidently not occurred to him that her presence here, at such an hour and under such circumstances, was an irregular proceeding and one which might prove exceedingly compromising for her. Perhaps, she reflected ruefully, he had decided that those circumstances rendered all consideration for her feelings quite superfluous.

Fortunately, however, she was much too dazed with fatigue and by the strangeness of her recent experiences to review her position just now, and had only retained sufficient mental vitality to enable her to take an interest in her immediate surroundings and in the peculiarities of her companion, the most acute sense of humiliation she was conscious of being that occasioned by the realization of her intense interest in him. But she could not help it—she was much too weak to fight against and control any rebelliousness in her own mind, so against her will she had to be interested because weariness had put that will so deplorably *hors de combat*. His appearance interested her—unkempt as it was ; and his evidently complete absorption in his art ; and his studio, with its piles of canvasses ranged, backs outwards, against the walls ; and the general disorderliness of the place and all the

unfamiliar objects scattered about. Even the artist's gruffly abrupt manner evoked her interest far more than her resentment, although it so distinctly gave her to understand that to him she was, as a woman, of no account, thrusting on her repeatedly unspoken assurances that he had not the smallest intention of availing himself of the situation in order to make love to her.

George Dufferin was certainly not handsome, she decided, casting stealthy glances in his direction, while she drank her soup and he sprawled on a couch facing her. Nevertheless, there were probably people who would not think his face unattractive. It was extraordinarily mobile, its expression undergoing such various and swift changes that it might strike some as a fascinating study. Altogether it was an odd mixture, full of ardent vitality, and yet with the abstracted look of a dreamer—that peculiar compound often discernible in possessors of artistic temperaments. For the rest he was a large young man—probably not more than five and twenty—loosely built, and with peculiarly luminous, pale blue eyes, dark hair, worn a great deal too long and giving him a shaggy aspect, clean-shaven, and with a large mouth and a square, prominent chin.

"I wonder if he picks me to pieces like that—my face, that is?" she mused. "And I wonder which it was—my face or me—that induced him to rout out that forbidding-looking housekeeper to heat soup and get a bed ready at this time of night. But, of course, it was my face. He was afraid of seeing it suddenly assume the rigidity of death, and becoming no use for whatever it is he thinks it can do. I wonder, too, how he'd behave if that happened. Blame me for

murdering it, and wreak his vengeance upon me? Oh dear, how silly I am! Naturally, if my face was dead, I'd be dead too, and wouldn't mind what he did.'

"When you've finished that you may go to bed," the artist broke in abruptly on her reflections. "Harriet must have got the room ready by this time. Lucky Marsham's away, or you'd have to sleep on the sofa."

"After the streets a sofa would be luxury," she returned. "And—and it's only for one night."

"Is it?"

As he uttered this question in a challenging tone, he cast a look at her which revived some of the terror she had felt during the first few seconds of their encounter. His curt speech, moreover, recalled her foolish vow, making her wonder if, in some mysterious manner, he had acquired knowledge of it and intended to hold her to it.

"But he has done for me the greatest service anyone has ever done, so I owe him a lot, and if I'm to pay my debt I must do it in the way he wants," she reminded herself sternly. "And even if he doesn't know—and really how could he possibly?—I'm bound to keep an oath or else suffer badly in my own esteem."

Aloud, however, her response was less submissive.

"You don't suppose, do you, that I'm going to take up my abode here permanently?" she demanded truculently.

Again he turned his eyes lazily in her direction.

"Until I've finished with you that's exactly what I do suppose," he replied.

Penelope gave a little gasp, while a horrible sense of powerlessness seemed to overwhelm her will and

her heart once more thumped out : " the oath—the oath ! "

" I don't want to be ungrateful for your hospitality, but I really think I should decide for myself about accepting any more of it," she protested, but with little confidence that the attempt would prove effective. " I've got to find work and to earn my living, and I prefer to live in lodgings by myself and to be as independent as I can. But if you need me as a model—which, I presume, is what you think I'd be of use to you for—I'd be that quite willingly, though it's not my profession, because of the way you befriended me to-night. However, I must arrange that I live as I choose, and that I leave this place first thing to-morrow—to-day, I mean."

Although he had listened with obvious impatience he had not attempted to interrupt, but the moment she finished speaking he made a gesture which appeared to dismiss her point of view with vehement scorn and disgust.

" Haven't I told you that, now I've got you, I'll not let you escape again ? " he demanded.

Penelope sighed. When one was so tired that it required an almost superhuman effort to produce coherent speech, argument was very exhausting. Besides, her brain felt absolutely incapable of any exertion, whether it were that of contemplating her own case or of reasoning him into a more rational frame of mind.

" Look here," he went on presently. " For more than two years I've been hunting for you, so it's not to be imagined I'd let you go the minute I'd found you. When the inspiration is with me I shall want you, and you must always be here, ready and waiting for that.

If you lived far away it would be impossible to manage."

"But can you not see how living here might be impossible for me? Can't you—can't you see that what you suggest might be—might be awkward?"

"I haven't thought of that."

Penelope set the now empty bowl upon the floor, and for a few minutes gazed reflectively into the fire. Being no longer on the point of starvation, she no longer felt reckless and demoralized; and the realization of the consequences of her rash action was affecting her as an extremely unpleasant restorative from the torpid condition to which her common sense and reasoning powers had been reduced by physical exhaustion.

No, the period of demoralization had certainly gone by, but—but had not her regeneration been accomplished rather late? Had it not come too late to be of any use except as a producer of horror and humiliation at the irrevocableness of the folly she had committed?

How much did this man understand and believe about her? she asked herself with a sense of overwhelming shame. Did he credit what she had told him about waylaying the first passer-by and begging for charity? It was difficult to be sure, and his attitude made her anxious. Already, had he not insinuated that her reputation was of little account? And she had not the hardihood to essay to convince him otherwise. It was difficult to find any other reason, however, for his entire indifference to her feelings on the subject of her future manner of living. And he was, he must be, an egoist, of course—an egoist, and a monomaniac, where his work was con-

cerned. Yet egoism alone could not account for his treatment of her. Perhaps he was mad : that was her one remaining hope.

"Have you any money?" he inquired with startling suddenness.

"No; not a penny."

Once more he turned his face towards her, and this time it wore a triumphant grin.

"Good," he said. "Then until I've done with you, you'll be penniless."

"Do you mean that, if I consent to be your model, I'll get no payment until my employment ends?"

Apparently the dismay and indignation depicted on her face interested him, for he surveyed it appreciatively for some seconds. Nevertheless, he remained completely unmoved by, or possibly unconscious of, the feelings which it unmistakably revealed; and as Penelope ceased speaking he even laughed.

"That's it—you've understood me perfectly," he congratulated her. "But when you say 'if you consent,' you're taking rather too much responsibility on yourself, I fancy. I didn't ask for your consent, or want it."

Penelope stared at him aghast.

Then had the Power which answers prayers and listens to unuttered oaths taken hers so completely *au pied de la lettre*? Had it inflicted on her the slavery which—at a moment when she was scarcely accountable for what passed within her brain—she had vowed to accept gratefully in return for a speedy rescue from the sufferings that had temporarily atrophied all save physical cravings? And was this man aware of it? Had a subconscious knowledge been conveyed to him, now prompting his speech, bestowing on him at the

same time an absolute confidence in his own powers of mastery?

Startled into desperation at this preposterous possibility, Penelope half rose from her chair, as if contemplating immediate flight in defiance of all tyrannical decrees.

"At present I can't reason with you," she muttered faintly, "I'm too tired and sleepy. Let me rest now, and perhaps I'll be able to make you look at things sanely in the morning. I'm too dazed even to think clearly for myself."

"Sit down," he commanded peremptorily. "Your reasoning can't make the very least difference to me, so don't worry yourself over it. However, as you show signs of getting troublesome, I'll try to instil a little reason into you at once. In any case, this is the very best hour for settling the business side of things. The good daylight hours can't be wasted on them."

Mechanically she obeyed.

Undoubtedly some power which was stronger than her will, or even his, was ordering her actions to-night. Were that not so, she should surely have rebelled.

"But to return to the money question," she pleaded desperately. "I *must* be paid regularly and promptly for what I do. Already I owe four weeks' rent, and unless that's forthcoming I'll not be able to get my clothes and things from the lodgings where I left them when I was turned out last night."

At first the artist appeared inclined to dismiss this subject with a contemptuous shrug, but on second thoughts he decided to set her tediously trifling mind at rest.

"Give me the address and I'll settle all that," he

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"Give me the address and I'll settle all that," he

said impatiently. "Those are insignificant details, and not worth troubling about at present."

"But——" Penelope made a gesture almost as eloquently expressive of exasperation as any she had seen him accomplish, "—why shouldn't it be simpler to pay me in the ordinary way instead of giving yourself all that extra bother—much more economical too, and less tiresome?"

"While I'm painting you, I won't trust you out of the studio."

"But if you suspect me of dishonesty and untrustworthiness, doesn't it strike you that I might steal some of your property after you'd gone out and left me here alone? You can't mount guard on me day and night, and I'd have heaps of opportunities to run away and get money by selling your things."

"No, it doesn't strike me."

"And why not?"

"With that face I don't think you'd do it."

For some seconds Penelope stared at him in mute amazement.

"The face!" she presently ejaculated in accents of bitter scorn. "But *it's* not *me*—it's only a surface thing, which——"

"Which must stay here while I need it," he interrupted, this time scanning it with a faint smile.

"Then, by its looks, can't you tell how it'll hate being a prisoner?"

His smile disappeared, and he shook his head with an air of abstraction.

"What then?" Although angry with herself for being so curious, Penelope could not restrain the question.

He screwed up his eyes as if he were essaying to

descried some minor details which, at a first cursory glance, were not observable.

"It tells me that I caught you and brought you here at the one moment of your life when it was possible to catch you and bring you," he said.

Penelope hastily averted her eyes; nevertheless, as they looked into the fire, she smiled.

The artist's answer had won her—and in some subtle, inexplicable way it had kindled in her a sympathy for his aims. His reluctant admission had done much towards restoring her self-respect, banishing her apprehensions, and making her present position appear less impossible.

"But in taking advantage of that moment, were you quite playing the game?" she asked presently, her eyes still on the fire.

"For the sake of realizing ambition I'm quite prepared to sacrifice all my prejudices," he replied, with a pointedness which she could not mistake.

Why, she asked herself bewilderedly, during the silence succeeding his remark, was she not angry when he more than implied that, for a selfish ambition, he was condemning himself to an indefinite period of constant association with herself, and by so doing was remorselessly sacrificing not only her and her good name perhaps, but his own comfort and privacy—that he disliked her society and was unattracted by her personality? But she wasn't angry. On the contrary, she half realized, with a dazed sense of amazement, that her sympathies were the allies of his ambition—not of himself, but of that unscrupulous thing which urged on him these sacrifices. Far from condemning it, she felt induced to accord it the tribute

of her respect—this miraculous thing which had power to promote so self-abnegating a spirit.

"I'll stay here and be your model as long as you like," she muttered, and the words seemed to her even more preposterously astounding than the thoughts which had actuated them.

"I never supposed you'd do anything else," came the prompt but ungracious rejoinder.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Penelope opened her eyes next morning it was with a haunting sense that something was wrong.

It was broad daylight, so she must have slept late. It was Sunday morning apparently, for the church bells were vying with each other in the sonorousness of their summons to the church-going community. And she was in bed in a strange room, hoping with a rapidly expiring hope that the vague memories which depressed her were merely those of some nightmare.

Then she heard a voice in the passage outside, recognized it as being associated with the memories, realized where she was, and remembered.

Last night a promise had been extracted from her—or, had it been extracted? No, she was inclined to think that, while the normal processes of her mind had been temporarily suspended, she had surrendered it willingly. And the promise had been induced by a ridiculous vow and some far-fetched fancies resulting from an abnormally highly-strung nervous condition.

Horror-stricken, she sprang out of bed, and with frantic haste began to put on her clothes.

"I'll explain, and he *must* listen to me," she told herself as she flurried through her dressing. "There's no knowing but that he may be feeling just as I am now—the morning makes things look so different. And for all I can tell, he may have been drunk last night, and even less accountable for his sayings and

doings than I was. Anyway, I'll apologize for my part, thank him for his hospitality, and say good-bye. Most likely he'll be desperately relieved to get rid of me so easily, and I'll not have to make clear the impossibility of the position as regards myself at all."

Such a position, too! As Penelope considered it she was aghast. Well, he might be feeling as bad; though, because he was a man, his case couldn't be so serious. Oh, if only she could hasten at twice the pace to put all the distance that a speedy flight could accomplish between herself and all associations with that horrifying incident.

But when she confronted George Dufferin five minutes later, mortifying disappointment ousted her feebly reviving hopes. Those hopes had deluded her. For the artist was undoubtedly of the same mind as he had been on the previous night, or, if he had been under the influence of drink, then he must be under it still.

Indeed, if that were the explanation of his eccentricities and stubbornness and tyranny, his subsequent behaviour indicated that it was a chronic condition. But, no matter how eccentric a person be, Penelope could not believe that it was a normal condition; she had therefore to conclude that her employer, her rescuer, her benefactor, was chronically abnormal. But what was most disquieting of all was that the disease appeared to be infectious. For, after two minutes' argument on that Sunday morning, she was helplessly aware that it had infected her, had atrophied her will, and distorted her outlook. And during the succeeding days these symptoms attacked her as soon as she saw him engrossed in his art, whether in talking of it or working at it. Had the attacks not been intermittent it would not have been so bad; but, unfortu-

nately, liberation from the studio and his society brought about a sudden recovery to the saner frame of mind whose peace the other had destroyed.

Was she mad that she could allow another's fantastic whims to overrule all her prejudices and instincts, to permit herself to become the slave of a man who at times struck her as being mad himself?

Or was the whole affair predestined, as Dufferin had declared on the night of their encounter, and as her agitated nerves had, for a short time, compelled her to believe? The notion was absurdly far-fetched, was indeed little better than a phase of the madness of which she had been made the victim; yet, very often, she was induced to consider it the only possible solution to the problem as to how she had been prevailed upon to become an inmate of a bachelor artist's flat in Chelsea.

But, then, to accept that as an explanation must surely be another symptom of insanity?

"I was so certain I was sane and sensible, and knew all about taking care of myself," she sometimes reminded herself with bitter scorn. "I used to laugh when I thought of those first days when I made such a fool of myself over a man I'd never seen before and whose name I never knew. But I'm worse and not better than I was then. Well, it's a mercy there's no risk of falling in love here."

And there certainly appeared nothing to apprehend on that score, for George Dufferin, despite his ever-varying moods, was unvaryingly preposterous, outrageous, and bewildering, goading her to revolt against the dictator of her fate, and to anathematize ambition sixty times an hour. Never had she thought it possible to conceive such antagonism against a fellow-creature,

or to feel so irritated by a personality. Never before had anyone filled her with such confusingly paradoxical emotions—almost frenzied revolt against the individual, yet a sympathy, which only in his presence was called to life, for his enthusiasms and aims; impotent resentment at the advantage taken of her forlorn plight and at his selfish callousness as to how her present might affect her future; then, an occasional and fleeting sense of exultation in her own power to help him on the road to success, to accompany him on a journey which, travelling alone, she had been obliged to own that she had completely lost her way.

But Dufferin, being a creature of extraordinary paradoxes, may have infected her with these also. For, utterly heedless of her comfort as he usually appeared to be, even oblivious of the fact that she possessed a body and mind which merited a certain amount of consideration, he nevertheless kept his word as to arranging for the transference of her property to the studio, and two days after her introduction to it electrified her by producing the black account-book, duly receipted, and informing her that the redeemed possessions would arrive that afternoon. He scarcely allowed this thoughtful act, however, to soften her feelings for more than a moment, his subsequent conduct merely strengthening the conviction that he hated her—hated her even during those times when he sat gazing at her face with rapt absorption. Yet, again, he was quick enough to detect and to check any disrespect towards her on the part of his housekeeper, whose contempt and disgust of his new model was as perceptible as his own frequent discourtesies.

And yet there were moments when Penelope felt instinctively drawn to him by the conciliating con-

viction that his hand and brain, and her face, were combined as instruments for the achievement of a great masterpiece ; but those were during the moments when work alone occupied his thoughts, when his eyes kindled with an ardent light or else took a far-away, visionary look as he lost himself in the dreams which she was to help to materialize.

Far more frequent, however, were the periods during which she bitterly resented being made an instrument for any such purpose. Periods when, cramped by sitting for hours in one position, chilled to the bone, and with every drop of blood in her body feeling as if it had been frozen in her veins, she longed that her face were detachable, that she could snatch it off and hurl it at him—hurl it at him and perhaps wound him with it—when she could not even remember that he had succoured her as she was starving, in a way that no other nocturnal wanderer might have been inclined to do. Was it on account of that occasionally forgotten obligation that she stayed? Sometimes she told herself that she supposed it was—that gratitude must be one of her most marked and highly developed characteristics. In the meantime she instinctively and scarcely consciously adapted herself to her new circumstances, deciding that it was obviously useless not to bow to the inevitable with as good a grace as possible, and so wait for the order of release which could not be long withheld.

After all, she reasoned, there was only herself, and if things looked bad on the surface their looks maligned them. And there was nobody really to care—a sufficiently consoling knowledge, because it satisfied the requirements of self-respect.

So the first week passed, bringing Saturday round

again, after six days which, except for the tumult of varying emotions that distinguished one from another, had been insupportably monotonous. With Saturday had come a rebellious mood—the result of sitting motionless from ten o'clock, without daring to move or look about. Nevertheless, Penelope was fully aware that her employer had made no less than three charcoal sketches of her head, each of which, after completion, had been flung aside with the savage vehemence of hopeless dissatisfaction.

"Does it never strike you that you waste a tremendous amount of time and canvas?" she was presently goaded to taunt him.

"Sit still."

But Penelope's chair was very hard and she felt she could endure the discomfort no longer.

"If you're thinking of wasting any more you might at least have the humanity to let me stretch myself first," she went on. "One would think that a person who lays claim to enough imagination to invent a subject for a painting should be able to imagine the wretchedness of a person who's been glued to a hard piece of wood for two hours and not been let move a muscle the whole time."

"Sit *still*!"

But the tone of this second injunction was just a degree too peremptory to prove acceptable to Penelope's present frame of mind; so instead of inducing her acquiescence it incited her to revolt.

Directing a defiant glance in his direction, she tossed back her head, then, stretching her arms, indulged in a luxurious yawn.

At the moment Dufferin was stooping to pick up another canvas, and did not notice what she was

about, but the instant he looked up and became aware of what was happening he did not pause to reflect whether her actions were justifiable or otherwise. Down with a crash went the easel in front of him and the chair behind him, as he bounded to his feet and hurled himself with the violence of a tornado on his refractory model.

Penelope's enjoyment of freedom of movement was shortlived. For while her arms were still extended, a relentless grip closed upon them, and before she had time even to think of resistance they were forced down and pinioned to her sides.

After recovering from the shock of this assault her first feeling was one of utter amazement, which opportunely occasioned her temporary unconsciousness of the acute discomfort of being crushed into her seat by a severe pressure on her arms.

"Whatever has come over him?" she asked herself blankly, when she had sufficiently recovered herself to give attention to the figure crouching over her and glaring at her with eyes that seemed to shoot forth blue sparks of flame.

But after she had dismissed the first and not unnatural surprise that he had suddenly gone dangerously mad, she was able to arrive at a thoroughly gratifying explanation. She had really annoyed him, really made him angry—didn't everything about him go to prove that she had succeeded in provoking him beyond the limits of his self-control?

Accordingly, when she had made a fresh struggle for liberty, Dufferin's fierce, mesmeric stare was met by eyes brimming over with derision.

"If only there were a looking-glass handy," she remarked regretfully. "For I'm positive we must

look awfully funny—especially you. I wonder whether you'd appear like a dentist going to pull out a tooth, or like an assassin in the act of murdering someone."

With a muttered ejaculation of disgust he let her go.

"I believe if it wasn't that I might never get hold of another face like yours, I would murder you," he declared, in a voice that was the production of rage brought to white heat. "And if you interfere with my work again, I warn you I won't be answerable for what I do. Twenty times a day you tempt me to kill you."

Penelope shook herself; then pulled up her sleeves and anxiously examined her arms for marks of his brutality.

"And if only you'd let me know sooner that you'd homicidal tendencies, I should have scoured London for a substitute who was tired of life, and been satisfied with a commission as payment for having got her the job," she said meditatively. "As it is, I'm more than half inclined to take an action against you for assault, and to retire into private life on the money I'd get in damages. Not only are you undisciplined, but quite unreasonable. Any sensible person would be grateful to me for putting a stop to that criminal waste of canvas."

With a snort of contempt, Dufferin turned away and strode back to the overturned easel and chair, to both of which he administered a vicious kick.

"It's not the model's place to criticize what I do," he growled.

"And what exactly is a model's place?" Penelope inquired with provoking amiability. "I'm only an amateur, you know—I told you before I started that it wasn't my profession—so I should be excused for

not knowing. At all events, an amateur has privileges that a professional can't expect, and allowances are always made for her, and—she should receive more courteous treatment."

The artist's reply was made to an accompaniment of crashes, as with the ruthlessness of utter disheartenment, he flung all his paraphernalia out of his way and out of sight.

"A model's business is to sit still and *to hold her tongue*—unless she has to stand or lie and kneel or hang from the ceiling for that matter, and if her employer requires it," he announced explosively, ignoring the latter part of her speech entirely. "Great Cæsar! what have you to complain of? Wasn't this what you were made for—the only purpose you were born for? When you sold yourself to it for food and shelter, didn't you admit as much? It's your life, woman—but for the use you may prove to me as a model, you'd not exist to-day."

At this callously delivered reminder of her obligation Penelope recoiled as if something had struck her, and at the same moment he turned suddenly round and laughed.

"So I scored that time," he said. His excitement had apparently subsided, and in its place was the old assumption of indifference to anything she might feel. "Well, I'd never have found out how to do it if you'd not taken such trouble to show me, so I ought to be grateful to you for giving me a hint as to how insubordination in amateur models can be quelled."

As usual she could not resist the temptation of blazing back at him.

"The next time you attempt to rub into me the wretched reason why I'm a prisoner and a slave

here, I'll go on strike completely," she threatened. "Until you've begged my pardon and given me a definite idea as to when I'll be at liberty, I'll refuse to sit for you."

"Indeed? And how will you manage all that?"

As he spoke he advanced a step nearer and contemplated her with a sort of superciliously patronizing interest which was excessively galling.

"I'd cover me face with my hands or keep it turned away whenever I thought you wanted to draw it."

"Then, if you behaved in such an absurdly childish way, how do you think you'd be treated?"

Again he turned from her, laughing sardonically, and Penelope could do nothing but clench her hands in impotent wrath. Days ago she had realized that in sparring with him she only occasioned loss of dignity to herself, yet it seemed that no previous ignominious experiences could warn her. The artist was too well provided with the means wherewith to accomplish her discomfiture, and had no scruples as to availing himself of them; and the bitterest moment of all was when he gloated over his victories.

"You can go to your room now, if you like," he said presently. "I'm sick of work, and shall go out for a couple of hours. I'll be back at two, and hope to find you in a better frame of mind by then. There'll still be an hour's daylight left."

For some minutes after she had heard the outer door bang behind him Penelope remained on her hard seat, gazing abstractedly before her. Then she suddenly sprang to her feet, her eyes now reflecting the brilliance of an idea that had opportunely flashed into her brain.

"Why, of course!" she muttered excitedly. "This is Saturday, and I'm due at the Lembridge's for the week-end! What a heaven-sent mercy that I remembered it, and didn't remember it soon enough to ask his leave." Then she laughed, in pure light-hearted exultation. "It's I who'll be scoring this time, I fancy. Oh, won't he be angry when he gets back, with the spirit moving him to paint, and finds that his model has gone!"

But she had no money—not even so much as would pay her fare to Norwood. As she realized this the light faded from her eyes and she stared blankly about her. Could she borrow from Harriet? No doubt the housekeeper might be glad enough to lend the wherewithal to allow her master's despised model to play truant and thereby get herself into serious trouble. Nevertheless, Penelope dismissed the notion of applying to her without bestowing on it a second thought.

Something in the room might inspire her with an idea. Slowly her eyes roved round it, then became fixed on a spot in the middle of the chimney-piece, and the light of triumph shone in them once more.

"If he finds out he'll surely realize that this was predestined, too!" she told herself with a little gurgle of laughter, swooping upon a silver coin which, to her certain recollection, had reposed on that particular spot for the last week, having been placed there possibly as a test of the trustworthiness of penniless models. "That's how I feel about it, anyway, and I'm not going to be so foolhardy as to upset the Fates' arrangements. I should be grateful to them, and to their absurd *protégée* as well, for providing for my

wants at the critical moment, but I hope I'll never need their charity again ! ”

Grasping the shilling tightly in her hand, she laughed again. She was a thief—but so would anybody be who had spent six such days in this place !

CHAPTER XII

By the time Penelope came in sight of the prim little semi-detached villa that was the home of the Lembridge's, her feelings as to what she had done had undergone a considerable change.

No longer was she elated : no longer did the thought of revenge afford her satisfaction. The reactionary state after feverish excitement and recklessly hasty action had set in, bringing with it doubts and apprehensions.

She had acted on the spur of the moment with no other motive than to revenge herself upon George Dufferin. But was she contemplating making use of Bertie Lembridge for revengeful purposes ? That was the question that now weighed most heavily upon her flagging spirits.

Why hadn't she paused to think ? Well, perhaps it was better she hadn't ; for if she had demurred one moment she would now, in all probability, be awaiting the artist's return.

Yet what was she to do next ? Of course, she owed it to Bertie to make a full confession of all that had happened since his visit last Saturday ; but after that confession had been made what should she do ? His reception of her story was not the cause of her apprehensive uncertainty ; for she knew him well enough to make a very shrewd guess as to what it would be. The trouble would be to prevent him

forcing her to make use of him, and that was the last thing she wanted, or had ever intended to do. Bertie might prove extremely troublesome in his anxiety on her account, for it would be absolutely impossible to make him understand that her own mental disquietude would only be augmented, the sufferings of her self-respect only aggravated, by allowing him a decision as to the best way to overcome her difficulties.

But that she would return to the studio was out of the question. After stealing that shilling she had no intention of returning, would not dare to return. And now she came to consider it, the artist had suffered worse treatment than Mrs. Robins. For he had provided her with so much more, while the trunk she had abandoned would afford much less compensation for his losses than it might have for those of the landlady.

Oh, dear! life seemed sometimes such a baffling *cul-de-sac*!

At all events, here was Bertie's house—the one with "The Oaks" written in large white letters upon the fan-light above the door. With her hand on the gate she paused and glanced up at the name, the faintest gleam of amusement flickering in her eyes. "The Oaks" suggested such dignity, suggested some stately mansion standing in the seclusion of its own thickly wooded grounds; but possibly the door was made of oak, and that was why . . .

The door opened suddenly, cutting short her speculations as to its texture; dispersing thoughts that had been conjured into being solely as a diversion from more disquieting topics, and Bertie Lembridge appeared upon the threshold.

"Hallo!" he called out, bounding forward to

meet her, as with an effort she shook her wits together and hastily opened the gate, outside which she had paused so abstractedly. "I was just making up my mind to go off to meet you—to rout you out of your digs."

"Why?" she asked, smiling rather vaguely.

"Because it's after half-past one, and it's not like you to be unpunctual," he answered, as they met in the middle of the path, and he scanned her face anxiously without vouchsafing any more conventional form of greeting. "Well, nothing was wrong, I suppose, as you look all right—look a lot better than you did last week, in fact."

"I told you I was all right. It was because you wanted to think I wasn't that you decided I wasn't," she answered a trifle peevishly; then inwardly added, with a pang of self-reproach: "Surely I'm not going to start evasion again? I must shake off that habit and be honest this time. I owe that, at least, to Bertie."

He relieved her of her parcel, containing a few things for the night, which she had hastily collected before leaving the studio, and turned again towards the house.

"It's still uncommonly cold. Hope you've not been doing without fires?" he inquired, eyeing her suspiciously.

"No. I've had splendid fires—all day long."

"Well, that's some comfort. And butter—have you had butter and fresher bread?"

"Tons of butter and loads of bread."

"Several times this week I've thought of going out to Shepherd's Bush to see how you were getting on, but—somehow, I didn't."

They had reached the doorstep, and Bertie paused, obliging her to pause also.

"So the fates were on his track, too, but were considerate for once," Penelope reflected, as she braced herself for the first plunge into candour.

"It's just as well you didn't, for I've left Mrs. Robins," she said aloud, rather breathlessly.

"Gone! Where have you gone and why?"

But before there was time for an answer another voice intervened, followed immediately by the appearance of a short, stout woman, strongly resembling Bertie in feature and colouring, though more than double his age.

"Ah, Penelope, is it?" the voice, which had an habitual tone of apathetic plaintiveness, inquired. "So you've come at last, dear? We were just wondering if we hadn't better go on with dinner."

Penelope breathed an inaudible sigh of relief.

"I'll explain later," she muttered hastily, flashing on Bertie a warning glance before responding to his mother's faintly reproachful greeting. "Don't mention it to anyone till then."

"Bertie's been getting fidgety about you and making us really feel quite upset," Mrs. Lembridge tranquilly went on to explain, smiling patiently on her guest. "Come in, dear." As she gave the invitation she passed a hand through Penelope's arm and drew her into the hall, Bertie following close behind. "Alice is busy helping to dish up the dinner, and I do hope the chops won't be overdone, but really— Ah, well, Bertie's always telling me not to worry over trifles, and I suppose he'd call that one. So let's be cheerful and make the best of everything. Such a

comfort on Saturdays and Sundays having Alice home to help. We've a new little maid—a girl from the orphanage—and really it's appalling how little she can do without help. Well, well, one should be thankful to have anyone, and the girl's honest and good-tempered and doesn't mind being told things, and doesn't expect the high wages most girls ask nowadays. Is this your luggage, dear?" turning to eye the parcel, which Bertie carried, rather dubiously. "Well, I fancy we women can bring that up without help, so I'll show you your room."

Whilst Penelope was being escorted up the stairs, shown her bedroom, and assisted to divest herself of her outdoor things, a ceaseless trickle of conversation flowed from her hostess's lips, entertaining her with various items of domestic news and descriptions of household arrangements and difficulties.

Mrs. Lembridge was good-natured and hospitable, and was fond of Penelope—perhaps all the fonder because she realized that her son's hopeless infatuation for the girl secured him to herself for as long as that infatuation should last—but she was decidedly a bore. Her conversation, delivered in a plaintive monotone, could never be ignored, as it was never safe to allow attention to wander from it lest recollection should be recalled by a mildly reproachful glance expressing grieved wonder at some omission to utter, at the right moment, the sympathetic ejaculation that was expected of all listeners as an intermittent accompaniment to these discourses.

When they again descended to the hall, both Alice and Bertie were waiting for them, and the former bestowed a kiss upon Penelope which brought a shadow of envy into her brother's eyes.

"And now for dinner," she remarked. "Though mother's nothing in the world to hurry about she's been working herself into fits because we're a few minutes behind time."

Dinner passed off without any untoward incident in the nature of questions which Penelope might have found difficult to parry. Bertie, of course, had been warned, and may possibly have transmitted the warning to his sister, although Alice's habitual silence and unobtrusiveness rendered the precaution scarcely necessary; while Mrs. Lembridge was far too fully occupied in directing and supervising the new maid when she came into the room, and criticizing her and inquiring her guest's opinion on her comportment after she had left it, to have a moment to spare on any matters less closely connected with home.

After dinner, it was decided that Bertie and Penelope should have a walk while Mrs. Lembridge took her customary afternoon nap, and Alice, after helping the orphan to wash up the dishes, attended to the household mending for the week. A good deal of time was expended, however, in discussing this plan, as Mrs. Lembridge was obliged to discourse at some length on the atrocities committed by laundries, and to go into minute details as to the washing she sent out and the amount that was done at home, some by Alice, some by the orphan, and how, through increasing the home washing, Alice's duties in the way of mending had appreciably diminished.

"At last we're off!" Bertie ejaculated with a sigh, as, during a pause in his mother's injunctions to be back in good time for tea and a lengthy enumeration of her reasons why punctuality was so essential, he seized the opportunity to shut the front door and so

to cut off effectually the audience on the steps from the orator whose head had only been partially visible as it peered cautiously round the drawing-room door, simultaneously courting and striving to avoid the blast of cold air from outside.

"And now I've got to begin," Penelope reflected. "Well, I expect the best way to do it is to emulate Mrs. Lembridge's methods and to sort of wind myself up and forge ahead without allowing time to consider what impression I may be making."

It seemed to her now that it would have been easier had she been able to tell him in the house, but out here in the strong afternoon light, and walking by his side at a brisk pace, confession was rendered doubly disconcerting. All the time he could study her face if he wanted to, and she would have no chance of relieving her feelings of nervousness by a change of attitude, or by retreating in a hurry if she felt the strain of confronting him longer was more than she could endure.

Nevertheless, she made a valiant effort, and found that once she had started, things were not quite so bad as she had feared. Without the least preamble she launched forth upon a narration of all her adventures since last they had met, and succeeded in accomplishing a very accurate statement of facts, with only a small number of reservations—necessary because of sparing Bertie's feelings.

As she had anticipated, he was immensely shocked—shocked and indignant at Mrs. Robins's treatment of her, shocked and horrified beyond his power to express at the artist's audacity, shocked and grieved beyond all else that she had accepted help from a stranger after rejecting his own offer. Of course he

interrupted her many times, and more than once he stopped short, his agitated demeanour drawing curious glances from passers-by ; and of course he threatened all sorts of things by which her oppressor should be brought to understand the enormity of his transgressions.

" But it's I that you should be angry with, Bertie," Penelope at last remonstrated. " It was my fault—all mine, really."

" Not so much as it was mine, if it comes to that. I should have been firmer with you—that's what I should have been," he declared gloomily.

" Oh, well, none of that can be helped now."

What harm could there be in letting him enjoy a belief that his ill-advised moderation in the matter of firmness was mainly responsible for the turn events had taken, she reflected. To feel himself so important and indispensable would accomplish much towards assuaging his pain.

" But it *can* be helped, and it *must*," he returned emphatically. " For one thing, you're not going back to that scoundrel ; for another, I'm going to give him a bit of my mind."

Penelope shook her head.

" I left him to-day with the fixed intention of not going back," she said, yet as she spoke an odd, sinking sensation assailed her, bearing with it a haunting doubt as to the adequacy of any fixed purpose she might form. " But I didn't intend you to——"

A vision rose before her of Bertie confronting the artist in his den, and before it her spirit failed her and the words she had been about to utter died on her lips. Poor Bertie ! How futile had his wrath appeared

as represented in the vision, and how ignominiously he was routed.

"Bertie, now that I've told you, shall we try to forget?" she pleaded instead. "It's so hateful—almost sordid—and I want to wipe it all out of my life—if I can. Let's try to pretend it never happened, and, perhaps, in time, we'll be able to convince ourselves."

"How can we? Anyway, we've got to make arrangements," he objected with brutal matter-of-factness. "You've got to get back your things and all that, too," he added practically.

"No—oh, no! He's really a better right to all I possess than Mrs. Robins had. Besides, if I sent for them he'd know where I am, and——"

"Rot! You bet he knows right well how outrageous his goings on have been, and that he'd be the very last person to hunt you up again, once he realizes that more people than just himself and you know what happened. That was the game he was up to when he wouldn't let you out—he was afraid you'd look up some friend and tell about it, and he knew public opinion would denounce him every day of the week."

"Then, Bertie, let's leave the arrangement-making to some other time," Penelope entreated. "After the effort of telling you I feel too confused to do anything or to think sensibly. Until I've had a peaceful night's sleep, I don't think I'll be able to think at all."

Instantly Bertie's expression changed to one of commiseration and self-reproach.

"Of course! What a selfish ass I am!" he exclaimed. "You're worn out, and no wonder. To-

morrow we'll have a good talk, and now we'll turn back, for you can't be fit for walking after all you've been through."

Penelope made no attempt to deny this with the truthful assurance that a walk was a relaxation after being mewed up for a whole week in an artist's studio. For a relaxation at the cost of so much perturbing discussion of her affairs seemed scarcely good value; moreover, now that she felt her duty towards Bertie had been discharged, an inclination to avoid him was beginning to make her uncomfortably impatient and restless. Accordingly, no sooner was his suggestion uttered, than she faced about, and for a few moments they retraced their steps in unbroken silence.

"Duffer that I am!" Bertie presently muttered, his indignation being apparently, for the time being, levelled against himself and his previous oversight. "Of course you were hungry, and when one feels like that the only important thing in the world seems to be to get food somehow. Oh, Lord! I could skin that cur for taking advantage of you in the low-down way he did! If only you'd let me know—if only I'd been there instead!"

Poor Bertie! If only he had been able to know her actual feelings at the fateful moment, how much more bitter might have been his lament, Penelope reflected. But she could not tell him now—now that she no longer felt demoralized and unscrupulous. Bertie must never even suspect that there had been one moment—a moment which was never likely to recur—when starvation might have made her his had he been at hand to claim her; one moment when she might have eagerly and gratefully surrendered herself. Certainly fortune had treated him badly when it

decreed that he could be absent then—decreed that George Dufferin should appear at that other unique moment when a stranger's charity seemed acceptable.

"Perhaps I'd got past being able to think sensibly," she said. "At first I really and truly believe I was, and sometimes since I've felt convinced I've never managed to get back the power of thinking sensibly. But I don't know. It's funny, and you'll think it crazy, I'm sure, but there are times when I get a conviction I was meant to be there, and that running away could be of no use. If he hadn't made me so irritated before he went out to-day, I don't believe I'd be here now."

She could hear Bertie grind his teeth, but that grating noise was his only response ; and as she heard it an irresistible impulse to turn his wrath upon herself seized her.

"In a queer way that I can't explain, his keenness about his work fascinates me," she went on, after scarcely a moment's pause. "Even when I'm almost too hungry, and sore from sitting so still, to think of anything but myself, I believe it attracts me, somehow. When he's *really* working, and is absorbed in what he's doing, or when he talks of his work as if nothing else in the whole world mattered a scrap, I feel oddly elated and carried away by the notion that I'm helping in the achievement of something that may win world-wide fame."

As she delivered this confession she glanced sideways at him, noting the pained compression of his lips, and becoming instantly contrite as she realized that the stubbornness expressed in their inflexible lines merely revealed aggravation of the virulence of his former sentiments.

"Yes," he muttered savagely. "And a brute like that has had plenty of opportunity to study what simple unprotected girls feel. Take my word for it, he knew jolly well what you felt, and he's merely been playing on your feelings when he talked that rot about his *work*. Work, indeed! Precious lot of work he does messing about among his beastly paints! Oh, I know his sort, and the sort of humbug he's been trying on you has been tried on a dozen other girls, I'd stake my oath!"

Penelope's lips parted with an energy which foretold a testy contradiction; then, without uttering a word they closed again and her face assumed a puzzled, preoccupied expression.

"What on earth was the matter with me?" she asked herself stupidly. All her sensations and ideas were getting into a more and more hopeless mix-up. A few hours ago she had been furious with the artist for declining to see her point of view, and now she was furious—or had very nearly been, had she not realized just in time the inconsistency of it—with Bertie, and simply because he could not make allowances for the very thing that had goaded her into escaping from the studio and seeking refuge with his family.

As if in the hope of readjusting her faculties, she gave herself a little impatient shake. That seemed to afford her just the smallest fraction of relief. Perhaps if, for a while, she could go on shaking herself vigorously she might contrive in time to rattle her wits back into proper order. To-night she would try how it worked—when she was alone in her room and at liberty to do what she liked without arousing apprehensions as to her sanity.

At liberty !

Ah ! those were the words, perhaps, that gave a clue to her puzzling sensations towards Bertie.

Naturally she had felt angry at his daring to suggest that she had been imposed upon and kidnapped, that she had been robbed of the power to judge things correctly—that her freedom of will and thought had surrendered to a tyrant out of a purely pusillanimous desire for dependence—that she lacked as keen an insight as his.

"That lie he told you about having seen you before——" Bertie broke out explosively.

"He didn't say decidedly that he had seen me," she cut him short.

"Well, he implied it, then," Bertie looked sulky, and evidently obstinately determined to argue. "It was just an underhand way of getting round you. He knew your sort, and——"

Again he was ruthlessly interrupted.

"You're talking of what you know nothing about," Penelope snapped sharply. "I don't suppose he ever actually *had* seen me—I certainly don't remember having seen him, and if I had I would remember—but he fancied he did, or dreamt it, and with a person like him that's just the same and quite as real."

Bertie nodded his head several times as if to convey that her explanation merely confirmed his suspicions.

"Bosh !" he retorted. "That's what you were meant to believe and what he knew you'd believe, and—and, of course, what you *did* believe. He sized you up, as I said before, and proceeded accordingly."

"Bertie, you're impossible ! You're—— Well, no matter ; but nothing will convince me that you're right."

Bertie made an impatient movement with his shoulders.

"I know it won't," he said. "You've a way of always believing a person to be a saint until he's been proved beyond a doubt to be a villain. And that's where you go all wrong—that's where you show yourself to be quite incapable of taking care of yourself."

For a few minutes conversation languished. Then, "Bertie," Penelope entreated coaxingly. "Let's stop arguing. If we go on like this we'll have a bad fight, and it's really not worth it."

"Um!" he grunted discouragingly. Then, with an apparent effort, added, "For the present I'm ready to drop it, but it's got to be thrashed out within the next twenty-four hours, so you'd better make up your mind to that."

"All right," she answered resignedly. "I suppose it has. Anyway, I mayn't feel so dazed about it presently, or—or so touchy."

As she demurred over a suitable description for her feelings, Bertie stopped abruptly, and the best she could contrive was jerked out in a note of astonishment as she followed his example. She glanced at him interrogatively, then perceived the direction of his gaze, discovering that it rested on the iron gate opening into the diminutive front lawn of "The Oaks."

"You'll be glad to sit down and have some tea," Bertie suggested, as he pushed the gate open and stood back to let her pass. It was evident that he was determined to acquiesce with her request in a pointedly extreme manner, and was therefore limiting his remarks to absolutely non-controversial topics.

But Penelope was startled by the suddenness of

the change as much as by the unexpected recognition of her whereabouts.

"You won't breathe a word of anything I've told you to *anybody*?" she implored, turning back impulsively, and in her earnestness clutching him by the sleeve, yet scarcely conscious of the familiarity of her action.

Nevertheless, she was fully aware of the shrinking movement with which Bertie withdrew from contact with her hand, and so astounded at it that she scarcely noticed the accompanying mumbled assurance. That shrinking movement hurt her, but really chiefly on his account and in a way she felt entirely incompetent to explain. It also added considerably to the deplorable chaos of her ideas and sensations.

CHAPTER XIII

As on the previous Sunday morning Penelope awoke with a vague and uncomfortable misgiving that something was seriously amiss.

Yet this room was not the one that had been assigned to her at the Chelsea flat, a discovery that should surely suffice to banish all misgivings. Then, should not the realization that she was not at the studio do all that was required to relieve her of the only conscious weight her mind could have to bear?

Nevertheless that weight was neither removed nor relieved, but grew more and more oppressive as comprehension returned to her clearly. It was a nameless, indescribable, unaccountable weight. "Had it been there the night before?" she asked herself irritably, "or had it formed itself out of her dreams?" She could not be absolutely certain; yet it seemed familiar in a way, though last night, possibly, it had not been so heavy, and had therefore escaped her attention.

But accompanying this nameless kill-joy there was a very decided and recognizable shrinking from encountering the kind people who had afforded her refuge from the results of last week's exploits. Of these Bertie was the one whom she most dreaded—she need not attempt to delude herself on that point—and the reason for dreading him was perfectly plain. Bertie knew, and Bertie intended to argue. Had he not declared his intention of thrashing a certain

matter out? And she—she did not want to listen to Bertie's arguments and entreaties: she had no more use for them than she had clearly defined reasons for her frantic desire to evade them.

Several times while she was dressing she shook herself impatiently, more in exasperation at the unsatisfactoriness of her own condition of mind than with any hope that she might rattle her wits back into better order. And several times she clenched her fists menacingly at her own reflection in the mirror, and ejaculated, "Oh—h—h!" in a tremulous hiss, expressive of the last extremity of despairing irritation.

Finally, to her intense dismay, she discovered that she was ready to go downstairs.

"Oh, what a fool I am!" she muttered, exasperation with herself at last coming to the rescue of her common sense. "If it was only to punish you I'd force you to rush on it, you cowardly little idiot! What's wrong is that you don't know your own mind, and that's a most maddening, intolerable state to be in. Go on now, and stop being such a despicable and ungrateful coward!"

Thus urged, she descended the stairs and entered the dining-room, knowing full well, all the time, that no courage to brave the unknown had been lent her for the effort. One half of her was still a shrinking, cringing coward, the other half a reckless one—the same reckless coward, no doubt, that had urged her a week ago to relinquish her self-respect rather than endure physical privation.

Yet what was wrong? What was she so afraid of? All through breakfast these two questions tantalized and baffled her, filling her with a vague alarm, making her answer other, though less perplexing, questions at

random, laugh at the wrong moment, or else indulge in outbursts of almost hysterical loquacity in the mistaken belief that by so doing she diverted suspicion from her moral predicament. Even when it was proposed that Bertie and she should go to morning church, whilst Mrs. Lembridge and Alice remained at home to prepare the Sunday dinner and incidentally to allow the orphan to attend her own particular place of worship, those unanswerable questions seemed to hammer on her until they agitated her heart into suffocating palpitations, and the answer they ultimately got was scarcely less disquieting than themselves.

"I'm not ready for him yet. I'm not worked up enough or sure enough of myself. When the time is his choice I'm at a disadvantage. I must choose my own and get well prepared."

But for what?

Surely conscience, in some mysterious way, had received notice of some subconscious decision, which would presently mature, and declare itself to her brain?

And, in anticipation, conscience was tormenting her, was warning her . . .

Bertie, however, proved merciful—if her conscience did not.

"We'll talk things over this evening," he suggested, as they left "The Oaks" at the moment when the bell of the church at the end of the road gave forth its first sonorous call of "Come!" "Mother and Alice will be going to evening service, so we can have the drawing-room to ourselves for a comfortable chat. You've been thinking things over, haven't you? I know you were still feeling too upset yesterday to see them as

they really are, but a night's rest and freedom from worry has made all the difference, as I thought it would."

"Yes," Penelope answered, but without conviction. Nevertheless she was thankful to Bertie. For had he not selected the time and place which had been her own unconscious preference? That evening hour was the one she had hoped for—were the interview unavoidable—and the drawing-room, or at least somewhere in the house, was the place that would best help to inspire her with self-confidence.

Yet, why was she to need additional self-confidence? Why was she so certain that the amount she already possessed might desert her? Oh, well, those were superfluous torments! If her brain could produce nothing better than that it were wiser to start trying to make it an entire blank.

The service provided more or less of a diversion and respite, so that, after all, she congratulated herself on not having surrendered to the impulse which had momentarily threatened to condemn Bertie to a solitary walk, and herself to a morning devoted to a hideously painful process of moral vivisection.

Later, moreover, dinner cooked by her hostesses provided diversion by supplying Mrs. Lethbridge with an apparently inexhaustible fund of reminiscences of former dinners at whose preparation she had assisted, all of which required the undivided sympathetic interest of her audience. Then, Penelope was expected to have taken note of the various distinguishing points of a large proportion of the feminine congregation at the parish church, and to be able to recall each individual impression and, when prompted by an allusion to any particular identification mark, to provide a

minute description of the lady's costume. This afforded a variety of mental exercise which, if wearisome, was at least a relief from perturbing introspection, besides supplying conversation that led into no pitfalls.

When dinner was over Mrs. Lembridge decided that Penelope must rest until teatime. Indeed, that they should all rest, leaving the washing-up of the dinner things entirely to the orphan.

"Sunday afternoon is the sleepest time in the whole week, though really I can't think why," she declared. "Whether you go to church or not you feel it, though, indeed, I must admit I like a nap every afternoon—but then I'm not as young as I used to be, or as strong, and, of course, they say vitality is low in the early afternoon, just as it is in the early morning, and my vitality——" She broke off to draw a sigh of plaintive resignation, then brightened up and resumed in a more sprightly tone, "Well, well, perhaps Providence deliberately makes us drowsy, so that we won't miss the occupations we're used to do on week-days; for you know, Penelope, I've brought up my young people in the good old-fashioned way, and all everyday work must be put away from Saturday night till Monday morning. Neither of my two would dream of doing anything except read a book or go for a walk; except, you understand, the absolutely necessary things like what Alice and I did this morning. Will you have a book, dear, or would you like to doze? Alice, find something for Penelope to read—that was quite a pretty story I got from the library the other day. Find it, dear; I'm sure she'd enjoy it."

So Penelope was provided with the pretty story, and for more than an hour she sat gazing fixedly at

the first page with a look of horrified fascination, which would most certainly have mystified the advocate of its Sunday-afternoon qualities had she been in a condition to observe her guest. At the opposite side of the hearth Alice read conscientiously, while her mother slept peacefully and sonorously in a large easy-chair placed right in front of the fire. Bertie had disappeared. Possibly he also was sleeping in his room upstairs, or again, possibly he was availing himself of a valuable opportunity to break the Sabbath while his mother's memories of his good old-fashioned upbringing were lost in the unconsciousness of slumber.

But though Penelope's gaze was riveted upon her book, she did not read a single word ; instead, as she held it close up before her eyes, her gaze seemed to pass right through it, and to focus itself upon some sight far beyond the range of human vision. She felt vividly awake and alert, therefore she had no doubts as to whether the object of interest were a creation of fancy or a reality. Quite distinctly she could discern two other eyes—blue ones—turned on hers like twin searchlights whose piercing beams penetrated even brick walls to seek her, bored holes through the book held up before her as a shield, hypnotized her with the indescribable, irresistible something, whose strange power to confuse her thoughts had grown so startlingly familiar during the past few days.

Staring straight into them she had forgotten all else. Apprehension, uncertainty, consideration for Bertie Lembridge, had all passed from her memory. No longer with a sinking heart did she anticipate the later hour when she and Bertie would be alone together, and she must face the inevitable interview.

Her mind was no longer divided, no longer filled with doubts. As a magnet acts on steel so those blue eyes were acting on her will, relieving her of all need for debate or demur. Their strange, blue fire had kindled some instinct within her, so she need reason no more, need do nothing but follow the instinct, go blindly where it directed.

"I am a slave—a slave!" her thoughts reiterated; nevertheless, she did not rebel. Then, "It's easier to be a slave—so far it is, and I don't want to, and can't, look any further."

Conscience had hitherto been on the *qui vive* to warn her against ingratitude to her best and oldest friend, but she had forgotten that now. Conscience had obviously detected the thing which had hitherto only existed in her subconscious mind. Perplexing and disquieting questions had tortured her this morning, but now there were none left—unquestioningly she was ready to obey an incomprehensible something which, had she considered it rationally, she would have immediately denounced as fantastically grotesque.

Presently a rattle of tea things sounded outside, and a tray was bumped against the door. Alice scrambled to her feet, to admit the heavily laden orphan whose usual request for admission it seemed to be; while Mrs. Lembridge's head lurched forward with a jerk that was uncomfortably suggestive of strangulation.

"Dear me, is that tea already?" she remarked, with a conscientious attempt to appear perfectly wide-awake and in possession of all her faculties. "I'd no idea it was so late. Do you like the book, Penelope, dear, or have you been taking a little nap instead?"

"No, I've not been asleep."

Penelope shut her book with rather unnecessary energy, and laid it on her knee, remembering thankfully as she did so that Mrs. Lembridge never discussed the novels she recommended, restricting herself to pronouncing them to be "pretty" or "horrid."

"I'll go and call Bertie," Alice said, and left the room forthwith.

That also was satisfactory; for Penelope now felt pretty certain of being unobserved as she stealthily removed the neglected book from her lap to a table at her elbow, which was already so profusely littered with reading matter of all sorts that there was every chance of its escaping further notice.

Presently Bertie and Alice reappeared, and tea was dispensed to an accompaniment of Mrs. Lembridge's unceasing monologue on trivialities. Neither of her children appeared to have inherited her conversational gifts, for Alice on no occasion opened her lips unless it was absolutely necessary, and Bertie only in special company. Had they attempted to compete with their mother at the present time, Penelope felt certain that the self-control, which already threatened every moment to give way, would have broken down with disastrous effects at the very commencement of one or other's monotonous recital of some banal experience of suburban life.

Impatience for an opportunity to get up and go was rapidly overwhelming her attempts to accord proper deference to her amiable hostess's remarks. Would tea never be over—would that droning voice go on for ever? And why must the voice address all its inanities to her, and why must its owner dawdle so maddeningly over a wretched little bit of buttered toast? What time was the evening service that these

two other women were going to? How she wished she could ask, and yet she dared not, lest she should betray that she did so with a self-interested motive. But then, supposing they changed their minds and decided to sit here all evening instead of going out to church . . .

At last Mrs. Lembridge glanced up at the clock.

"Perhaps we'd better think of getting our things on, Alice," she said regretfully. "Indeed, it's hard to tear oneself away from a good fire on such a cold night, but all the same——" She heaved a sigh—"We must think of what's good for our souls as well as what's agreeable to our bodies, and I must set a good example to my young people, mustn't I, Penelope, dear?" she wound up with a sprightliness which, by contrast with her former manner, lent to her speech a tone of cheerful resignation to a hard lot.

Penelope acquiesced with much greater enthusiasm than she had yet accorded to any appeal for her opinion, and jumped up with alacrity when Mrs. Lembridge began slowly to hoist herself out of her chair. Then, preceded by her hostess, and followed by Alice, she eagerly availed herself of the opportunity to seek her own room.

"You're not thinking of going to church again, dear?" Mrs. Lembridge inquired, as they all mounted the stairs together.

"Oh, no, I'm only going up for a handkerchief. I forgot mine."

"It must be in your chair in the drawing-room," an exasperatingly confident voice came from the rear. "I saw you wipe your fingers on it at tea, after the buttered toast."

Penelope would willingly have turned and felled

Alice with a blow. Why must silent people always choose the wrong thing to say when they elect to launch forth into speech?

"Did you?" she replied as politely as she could. "Well, as I'm started now I may as well get a clean one."

But when once the door of her room was shut behind her and she was secure from prying eyes, Penelope did not confine her attentions to handkerchiefs. First of all, she changed her shoes, then wrapped up those she had taken off, and the other few articles with which she had provided herself for the visit, in the brown paper that had conveyed them from the studio yesterday; lastly, she put on her coat and hat; then, returning to the door, stood close to it, though without opening it, in an attitude of intent listening.

It seemed a long time until all sounds indicative of feminine presences in the house had completely died away. But at length she heard the door downstairs shut, and the noise of footfalls on the path was borne to her from below on the stillness of the frosty air.

Yet another minute she lingered, fully convinced that an infallibly reliable instinct was restraining her, just in the same unerring way that it presently urged her forward, down the stairs, into the drawing-room, and across it until she stood face to face with Bertie, where he reclined in the deep arm-chair in which his mother had slumbered through the earlier part of the evening.

He was reading a Sunday paper, or pretending to read it, but as she entered he laid it aside and gazed at her in amazement.

"Are you going after all?" he demanded reproach-

fully, retaining his seat and looking up, half indignantly, half wistfully, at the face above him. "Mother looked in to say good-bye before she went, and said she thought to find you here as you only ran up for a handkerchief."

"I'm going—but not to church," Penelope answered, with an oddly sounding thrill of excitement in her voice. "I'm going back, but I came to tell you first."

The effect this astounding piece of intelligence had on Bertie was to cause his mouth to gape, and his eyes to open so widely that they looked as if, had they opened any wider, they would have dropped out of his head. It always took Bertie some time to gather his wits together in order to meet an unforeseen situation, and any startling news generally required several repetitions before he could thoroughly master its significance.

"What?"

Penelope made a scarcely perceptible movement of impatience.

"I've come to say good-bye, and to ask you to explain to your mother as well as you can, and to try not to think me a horribly ungrateful little wretch," she explained hurriedly, evidently restraining herself with difficulty from making her escape without waiting to offer him any further enlightenment. "But I won't ask you to try to understand *why* I'm going," she added. "I couldn't expect you to do that."

Perhaps in that she did him an injustice, but it was wholly unintentional; and, fortunately for Bertie, he was still too bewildered to feel the sting which the disparaging doubt, implied in her speech, must certainly have inflicted.

"You're not!" he contradicted.

As if with the intention of getting up to prevent her from carrying her purpose into effect, he grasped the arms of his chair on either side and hoisted himself a couple of inches off the seat : then his energy and self-confidence suddenly deserted him and he seemed to stiffen into that attitude, gazing up at her with the sullenly resentful look which is the expression of a consciously weak will when it finds itself in conflict with one more determined.

Penelope, looking down at him, felt her conscience give the faintest twinge, felt pity for a moment almost melt her heart ; but she allowed nothing of this to relax the inflexible resolution with which she confronted him.

"I shouldn't have come, Bertie," she said. "But as I did it's inevitable that I should go in the same way—just decide on it suddenly and act at once."

"But you can't go." His voice had appreciably deteriorated in confidence, sounding now a plaintive note of unutterable helplessness and hopelessness.

"Good-bye, Bertie ; I must be off quickly."

After a momentary hesitation she held out her hand.

"But why ?" he asked stupidly.

She shook her head.

"You couldn't understand, and where's the use of arguing ? We'd only quarrel, and I'd be sorry for that, but my sorriiness wouldn't make me change my mind," she said.

Bertie, however, was beginning to understand more clearly a certain amount about the unanticipated turn matters had taken, and he was, moreover, gradually recovering something of his self-possession.

"Do you mean to try to get me to believe that

you've changed your mind about that cad, and that you're thinking of going back to him ? " he demanded, suddenly flinging himself back in an attitude that proclaimed his resolve to rob the fugitive of the chance of acting on the spur of the moment by compelling her to waste as many moments as he possibly could on arguments which might weary her determination into a state of atrophy. " Didn't you agree to thrash out the subject of your future this evening ? Isn't that what we've been waiting for all day ? Then what do you mean by going on in the way you're doing ? "

Penelope made another and more noticeable gesture of impatience.

" It's no good, Bertie," she muttered, withdrawing her hand, which had been half extended towards him all this while, and turning away.

" Sit down, dear, and listen to me. Don't be foolish and perverse," Bertie pleaded. Against his intuition he was striving to convince himself that she was not serious, or that, at least, her decision was not influenced by any real desire to return to the tyrant at the studio.

" No ; I must be off," she repeated doggedly.

As she spoke she moved away towards the door, and Bertie, being no longer able to see her without screwing his neck round, sprang up from his chair and faced about in the same direction.

" I know what it is you've got into your head," he declared, but not altogether positively. " And I think, if you're bothered by fancies like that, you know me well enough not to mind mentioning it to me. You feel you shouldn't stay here any longer than the week-end that mother asked you for, and

that there's no way to relieve us of you but to go back to that brute. Well, you need——"

Penelope had wheeled round so sharply that he was startled into losing the thread of his discourse, and ended with his mouth still open ready to utter the next word, and his eyes betraying the haunting doubt which had already brought his tone into conflict with his words.

"Don't!" she commanded peremptorily. "Don't talk like that! I might and I should feel all you think I do, but I don't seem to have enough gratitude even for so much. I'm going because I have to—because I can't keep away—that's all."

A little, defiant laugh concluded this confession; then she turned her face from him quickly, reached the door, and resolutely gripped the handle.

"You want to go back to *him*?"

Mortification, bewilderment, and horror mingled in the muffled enunciation of the question.

Penelope paused again, a bewilderment quite equal to his overspreading her averted face as she waited, fingering the door-handle abstractedly, while her thoughts groped about in search of the motive which had influenced her so powerfully a moment ago, and which had now somehow lost itself in the confusion of other ideas and emotions.

"Not to him," she answered presently. "But for something that matters a great deal—seems to me to matter a great deal. He hates me—he loathes me—and because of that I'd never go back to him for his own sake alone—or for mine. But there's something I can't explain, which we both seem to perceive in each other, and which must be used so that his work may attain perfection. I can't explain: one feels

the thing though no words will describe or explain it ; but one can't feel the smallest friendliness towards a person who so evidently hates one—his society can only be an irritation and a misery. It's his ambition, his devotion to his work, that thrills me, and—and I'm murdering his work, perhaps, by staying away. In helping to win success for it I feel honoured, though accepting shelter from him is almost too humiliating to bear. And he—he's just the same : as a human being he hates me, but he values me as—— Oh, where's the good of my trying to explain, when it's certain you'd never understand ! ”

“ There you're mistaken. I quite understand.”

Bertie's voice sounded on a dead note, bringing a sudden chill to Penelope's heart, a sense of desolation and remorse which she was powerless to express.

“ I'm sorry I have to go like this,” she muttered awkwardly, opening the door without hazarding a last backward glance.

“ Wait—wait ! Hear what I've got to say first.” It was with an apparent effort that Bertie induced himself to utter his entreaty. “ I can't stop you going—I've no power to stop you, no right to interfere—and if I did, what good would it do me when I know you want to get away ? But I care for you, Penelope—more than you can understand or than I can tell, and it's awful to stand helpless and watch you walk straight into what may be ruin. Your happiness and your safety are more to me than any hope of happiness for myself, and if it was for your good I'd gladly say good-bye for ever and ever ; but——”

A catch in his breath stopped him ; and when he recovered his eloquence seemed to have deserted him.

Half out of sight, and ready to shut the door behind her, Penelope listened with a lump in her throat, but she would venture on nothing that might help or console him, knowing as she did what a farce it would be when that door must shut so soon, and behind it he must face a solitude which remembered words could never dispel.

"I know," she muttered, but scarcely loud enough for him to hear, and as she said it she took a step across the threshold.

But Bertie had not finished all he wanted to say, and his voice again pursued her.

"Remember I'm always here and that your happiness counts more to me than anything else," it proclaimed. "And I'm always at your service if you want me at any time or in any way—to-morrow, or a year or twenty years hence. You'll come to me, I know, when you feel you want a friend, and you can always rely on finding me here."

Penelope dared not trust herself to offer any acknowledgment. She slipped out, feeling wretchedly ashamed, and unreasonably lonely because it had not occurred to Bertie to speed her on her way in person; oddly surprised that he had not suggested that she should supply him with the artist's address, or asked her tyrant's name; and almost inclined to reproach Bertie for an attitude which insinuated that she was now cut adrift from the existence in which he and she had associated.

And yet, how could he have behaved more reasonably?

CHAPTER XIV

NINE o'clock was striking when Penelope pressed her finger on the electric bell of the artist's flat ; and scarcely had the ring begun to sound, than she was face to face with George Dufferin himself. Evidently, he had been lying in wait in the hall for some such summons.

All the strange exalted feelings which had impelled her to return instantly deserted her as she looked up at him, and she was now assailed by the first qualm as to how he would regard and visit upon her the breach of faith she had committed. The light on the landing shone full upon him, while that in the hall shone upon her, thus affording each of them the opportunity to read the other's expression and to be warned by it.

For several seconds they stared speechlessly at one another ; the man noting the conflict reflected in her eyes, between a desire to stand her ground and defend her actions and an inclination to make an abject surrender, accompanied, perhaps, by a fit of hysterical weeping. She, despite the nervousness which threatened such ignominy, was able to marvel at his restraint, to realize dimly that his anger—and he was undoubtedly angry—differed in quality from any she had previously witnessed, and to thrill, yet at the same time to recoil aghast, as she divined the passion of fury which at any moment he might decide to hold in check no longer.

But there was something besides repressed anger in his look, and because of that something she found increased difficulty in maintaining her defiant air. Despair, the depths of which she could not fathom, had in some subtle way left its imprint on that face since last she had beheld it.

Until now, the worst she had anticipated was a repetition of Saturday morning's bickering match, but she had bestowed very little thought on the meeting between herself and the man, being so strangely and entirely obsessed by the desire to return and again to associate herself with his ambitions. But now she could perceive that something more terrific had been awaiting her, and had time to regret her impetuosity, to regret that she was not peacefully enjoying a Sunday supper with the Lembridge family.

Presently he stood aside.

"Are you coming in?" he inquired coldly.

Still without uttering a word Penelope crossed the threshold and passed on mechanically towards the studio, not daring to hesitate or to look behind, not daring to hasten him into further speech by inquiring whether that were the direction in which he desired her to go. She had begun to regard herself as a criminal; but a repentant criminal, miserably remorseful, bitterly ashamed of the incalculable evil she had done. The grim denunciation in Dufferin's eyes had smitten her conscience in such a way as to reduce her to a state of abject self-abasement. And yet she was haunted by the disgraceful suspicion that, were the chance to recur, she would repeat her offence and find refuge in a second flight. For, as his step sounded behind her, she was likening it to that of a relentless, avenging Nemesis bearing a future that held nothing

for her save retribution for the transgression she had committed.

After following her into the studio, Dufferin shut the door, not with a bang expressive of the anger consuming him, but rather with a gentle deliberation which baffled any speculations as to the form of his attack. Then he crossed the room, halting at the edge of the hearthrug on which Penelope stood waiting.

"Sit down," he ordered.

Very submissively she obeyed.

"Look me straight in the face," was his next command; and as Penelope again complied, her gaze was caught and held by the strange magnetism of the pale blue points of light that were his eyes—the same piercing blue searchlights that had found her and fascinated her in the house at Norwood, miles away, the same strange magnetic power that had drawn her hither, despite Bertie's pleadings.

"I thought I told you that I'd be in at two yesterday and should want you then. Is that not so?"

"Yes."

"Then why were you not here?"

"I'd promised to spend the week-end with friends. The engagement was made a week ago, and I couldn't disappoint them without notice."

"But you had not the same scruples about disappointing me?"

Penelope made a frantic effort to avoid his eyes, only to discover that their cold, blue light had in some unaccountable way petrified hers into immovability. "Why could you not have asked my permission to go? Surely that wouldn't have inconvenienced you so very much?"

"Until after you'd gone out I'd forgotten all about it."

Involuntarily the confession escaped her, and she realized that, had it not been for those compelling eyes, she would never have allowed herself to utter it.

"At least you might have left some message, mightn't you?"

With another frantic effort she strove to repress the answer that sprang so readily to her lips, but again the eyes conquered her.

"I meant to run away and never come back. One doesn't bother about leaving messages when one does that."

"Yet you came back." He paused, scrutinizing her thoughtfully. "Yes, of course, you had to do that," he presently added with conviction. "But what induced you to run away when you were bound by a promise?"

"You annoyed me, so I wanted the chance to pay you out, and was glad that I hadn't remembered in time to mention the appointment to you. You had left a shilling on the mantelpiece, and it seemed as if it must be there on purpose to make things easy for me. I'd no money of my own, you know, so I stole it."

Was it fancy, or did the faintest gleam of a smile flicker for an instant in the blue eyes?

But before she could make certain they had released hers, now fixing their singularly piercing gaze on the opposite wall; and Penelope fell to wondering whether she would presently perceive that they had bored two holes through it.

"Notwithstanding the theft of the shilling you are honest," he observed.

Now that he was no longer looking at her and that

she had derived assurance from his subdued manner that no act of violence was to be apprehended, she felt more at her ease, with the result that resentment at the cross-examination to which she had been subjected kindled within her.

"I think you're making rather a mountain out of a mole-hill," she declared truculently. "All this seems to me a very trifling sort of thing to work you up into an all-is-now-lost state of tragedy about."

"Is it?"

She was so little prepared for explosive sounds that the vehement enunciation of the two words startled her by its unexpectedness, causing her to jump and change colour, then to shrink from the accompanying passionate gesture by which he appeared to signify all the bitterness of thwarted ambition, all the burning indignation provoked by those whose fatuous misunderstanding obstructed its attainment.

"Is it?" he reiterated, commencing to pace the room, as if physical exertion were a necessary relief to his pent-up mental perturbation. "Trifling to you, perhaps—you who belong to the ungifted majority who look on my devotion to my work merely as a means whereby to win your daily bread—who have no higher aspiration than that of keeping your body supplied with the food and clothing essential to its comfort. You and your kind—you plod along with your noses to the earth, knowing and caring nothing about soaring on the wings of inspiration—knowing nothing of what it is to be dashed down by the ignorant small-mindedness, which is so much part of you that you fail to perceive the enormity of its destructiveness to those who love and respect their talents for their own sake alone, who can gladly sacrifice every creature

comfort in the hope of ultimately attaining recognition of those talents. That puny, inert thing, which is your imagination, couldn't and can't conceive the strength and magnitude of an artist's passion for his art, his loathing and contempt for those who regard it as useless and unprofitable because success comes too tardily to crown it. What you are pleased to call practical common sense prevents you realizing how opposition to its advancement can accomplish a frenzy of despair. Ye gods! you interrupters, you necessary afflictions to the spirit of art, you would-be murderers of it! Yes, it's easy enough for *you* to call it a trifling thing—the strangling of a moment of inspiration—the ruin of an artist's real and best life—of his soul—of that which is the only love he knows or ever can know."

His air of cold self-restraint had entirely vanished. But as he strode backwards and forwards, gesticulating wildly, his voice resonant with the force and sincerity of his emotions, it was evident that he was not so much apostrophizing Penelope as denouncing an invisible host of Vandals, whose persecution of art was the outcome of their crass misunderstanding of a temperament constructed purely out of love and reverence for it.

Presently, however, his excitement abated, his manner became more composed, and he began to address her directly.

"You let me down into hell," he reproached her, but without pausing in his restless pacing to and fro. "It never occurred to your evenly balanced, mediocre little mind, I suppose, that inspiration might fire me at any moment, that I might return hot-foot to avail myself of it before the flame had time to die down?"

That's what happened. I came back here about ten minutes—according to Harriet—after you'd gone out ; since when, I've spent hours—well, *you* couldn't even attempt to picture what those hours have been. Were it not for your face I'd be tempted to murder you, as you murdered my inspired moment—murder you before you'd a second chance of making a fool of my art by your ignorant folly. But because of your face I won't—I can't. Instead, lest you kill inspiration again, I shall fetter you. Your face is necessary to me, but while there's the ever-present fear that it may slip away, I feel that it's useless—that fear overshadows inspiration, smothers it. What happened to-day, I am determined, shall not recur."

As he concluded with this announcement he stopped suddenly in front of her.

"But you can't understand," he said disdainfully. "To hope or expect that you will would be folly."

Penelope glanced up at him quickly, and her lips parted as if with the intention of contradicting his assertion. But in the end she decided it was more discreet to keep silence. He was scarcely likely to believe her if she told him that, in the drowsy atmosphere of the Lembridge's drawing-room, something closely resembling comprehension of his inspired moments had come to her, and that because of that unaccountable experience she had returned.

"I was positive you'd gone for good, and I knew I'd no power to bring you back—even if I'd succeeded in discovering where you'd gone," he pursued. "And if you escaped again I'd feel the same—would be driven down to hell in the same way. But it's not going to happen even *once* again."

"Oh, no," Penelope assured him, with what he

ought to have recognized as convincing sincerity. "I'll give you my word faithfully that I'll never go out without asking your leave."

But her assurance merely evoked a scornful, incredulous laugh.

"So you imagine I should be content to rely on that?" he demanded. "Not likely. Besides, if I once let you go, and you *didn't* return, what means should I have to force you back if I happened to find your hiding-place?"

"I'd come back—unless I was certain that your picture was finished."

He shook his head sceptically.

"I've decided that it must be done," he declared. "I shall marry you. Then I'll have the right to fetch you back if you ever attempt to run away. Nothing else will serve—nothing else could make me feel perfectly secure. And I believe my picture will be well worth the sacrifice."

For some seconds Penelope was too thoroughly electrified by the startling audacity of this announcement to do anything but stare at him in blank amazement and consternation. Consequently, he had time to proceed still further before her dazed senses had sufficiently recovered to enable her to denounce a speech which, even then, she could scarcely regard otherwise than as a jest made in revoltingly bad taste.

"It can't be done sooner than Tuesday," he went on imperturbably. "To-morrow will be Monday, and I'll make arrangements to get the thing over the day after that."

Was this a nightmare? Had he actually dared to say these things or had she dreamt them? And if he had said them could he be serious, or was he joking?

One was as bad as the other, however ; neither alternative exonerated him from having dared to insult her. But, oh, surely she was dreaming—surely she had fallen asleep over the “ pretty story,” had dreamed all subsequent happenings, and would wake in a minute to hear the orphan banging for admittance at the Lembridge’s drawing-room door ?

To make absolutely certain she pinched herself vigorously, then discovering that she was wide awake, she bounded to her feet, her eyes flashing forth an animosity and bitter scorn which should assuredly have annihilated him.

“ If you imagine my position here gives you the right to insult me, the sooner you find out otherwise the better,” she panted. “ Goodness knows, I’ve no reason to hope for consideration from you, but at least I relied on your decency to spare me coarse jokes like that.”

The heat of her indignation seemed almost to suffocate her, so that it was with difficulty that she could produce a voice above a hoarse whisper, while she trembled from head to foot with the violence of her agitation.

Nevertheless, when the artist presently seized her hands and pushed her back into her chair, she found strength for a determined though ineffectual effort to beat him off. For one hideous moment after that they stared at each other in silence, his face expressing a no less virulent hostility than hers.

“ Sit down, can’t you, and keep still ! ” he commanded, in a voice whose suppressed passion almost rivalled her own. “ I’m serious. I don’t joke where my work is involved.”

Still holding her wrists, he suddenly dropped on his knees beside her.

Good Heavens! Could he contemplate repeating his cold-blooded proposal in that attitude? Was he going to make bad worse by substituting a travesty of romantic formality for his previous spasmodic impertinence?

Hastily, Penelope drew back her head, while from between her narrowed eyelids all the loathing and scorn she was capable of feeling gleamed forth to warn him of how she regarded his prayerful posturing and the undesired wooing it foretold. Then, as her glance shrinkingly sought his, her anger of a sudden melted away.

For in that instant she realized that the passion depicted on his face was not for her, that his ardent gaze was not for her—that the piercing blue lights, instead of focussing upon her, went right through her, beyond her, on and on, penetrating the obscurity of future years of strenuous endeavour, straining to reach the point at which Fame sat waiting to crown him.

So he was not really kneeling as a suppliant! And she had been a fool to imagine he would do such a thing. It was evident that he had not the least intention of pleading with her—any more than he had of making love. But then—what was his intention?

This man bore no resemblance in any way to Bertie Lembridge, and she was entirely unfamiliar with the type to which he might belong, so it was hard to know how to deal with him. But while he looked like that—not really at her—she must collect her wits and try . . .

But already his gaze was returning, dragging back

to the present, growing conscious of the face that would hold it at its journey's end. Forgetful of her resolve, Penelope watched it with fascinated interest, as the superhumanly long-sighted look gradually left it, and until she realized by its sudden change to hardness and coldness that it had again become cognizant of her proximity.

"When you assume that you can dispose of me as you please, you take rather too much for granted."

Penelope's voice had regained its normal quality, and had he not continued to hold her wrists her equanimity might have been quite restored.

"Do I?"

"And before I go I hope you'll have the grace to make the apology that's owing."

At that he laughed, and the tone of his laugh was of anything but a normal quality.

"You're pretending to be a conventional little fool," he retorted. "But it's useless, so make an effort instead, and try to understand what your folly insists on having explained, will you? Understand that, when I decide to marry you, I'm not regarding marriage in the conventional way, but solely as it may prove of use to my work—as a legal bond that'll give me the prior claim upon your time. To-day's and yesterday's torture is not going to be repeated, and the only way of safeguarding against that is by making you entirely my property."

Once more Penelope was so thunderstruck that at first she could only stare at him in mute and horrified indignation.

Was it all, as she had just thought, a horrid joke? Oh, if only she could be certain of that—if only she could believe it absolutely. Then, at least, only wrath

need agitate her. Or was he mad? Or was this horror designed as a revenge on her for the few hours of misery she had caused him—had he rightly conceived this to be the most awful retribution he could inflict, and was his vindictiveness such that he was willing to torture himself in order to gain the satisfaction of seeing her tortured? But if that were so, it was the vindictiveness of a maniac.

"Nothing earthly would induce me to be bound like that," she at length found voice to gasp. "Even if I had any wish to marry at all, and you were the only man in the world, I'd sooner do anything than choose you. Oh, for heaven's sake, let go my hands!"

"But I didn't ask for your opinion, and I don't ask for your consent. The thing is arranged."

The utter callousness expressed in his tone conveyed his absolute indifference to her sentiments.

"You can't make me do anything against my will—gruesome and monstrous as you are!" she cried; but the shrillness of mingled doubt and fear rang in her voice, and the renewed effort with which she now attempted to extricate herself from his hold suggested the frenzy of panic. "Can't *you* understand how ghastly, how outrageously odious it is? Have you not got a human being's feelings to help you to understand? Or—or the sense of humour to tell you how absurd it is?"

"To get unnecessarily excited only makes a disagreeable thing worse, when the thing *must* be done—when we've got to make up our minds that it *has* to be done," he answered impatiently. "If you hadn't gone off yesterday the idea would not have occurred to me, but now, as I told you, I realize that unless it's done I shall never be able to leave you alone

without apprehending disaster to my work—an apprehension which, in itself, would prove disastrous to inspiration."

"No matter what grotesque notions come into your head, you've no right to insult and persecute me. Once a man's refused he should accept the refusal and retire—a decent sort of man, that is."

"I tell you, I never asked your permission, so your refusal doesn't affect me."

"Oh—h—h!" Penelope groaned.

How abominable it was! So, in order to exclude the cold, unemotional gaze that was boring right into her and petrifying her will, she shut her eyes; then set about ransacking her brain for the argument, for the insult which might prove of sufficient venom to procure her release. No wonder, she reflected desperately, that vague premonitions had struck terror into her heart when he followed her through the hall a short while since.

"Listen," he commanded presently, and this time his voice betrayed some feeling. "Can you tell me of what consequence you and I are in comparison to a great achievement which may outlive us both by many generations? Can you deny that we ourselves are not great achievements, that as mere human beings we are of no use to any other human being? Of course you can't—or, if you tried, you could not prove it. But there is a great achievement, though as yet unachieved, and which, I foresee, can never be achieved as it should be unless both our lives are put into it. Already I have decided that my life as a mere human being matters nothing, compared with the accomplishment of my ambition; that I must sacrifice everything I value so as to gain that ambition

in perfection. I have also decided that for you the same is necessary."

"*Your* ambition! What's that to me? Your work can't——"

With a little choking gasp Penelope checked herself. What was she saying? Over and over again, already, had she not recognized some strange subtle attraction exercised by his work and ambition over her actions and desires? Already had she not proved its influence over her destiny—that it was the captor and jailor of her freedom to think and act independently? And scarcely two hours ago had she not arrogantly boasted to Bertie that in helping to win success for the artist's work she would feel honoured. . . .

"What can your ambition matter to me?" she repeated weakly and stubbornly, her eyes avoiding his.

"You've none of your own," Dufferin went on, paying no heed to her interruption. "And, having none, the best use you can make of your life is by assisting that to which it is necessary at present. In order to accomplish that, you must belong to me: and to belong to me legally, we must get married. You need not be the least alarmed that I'll try to make love to you, or take advantage of the relationship in any other way than that I have already mentioned, for I don't want you in any other way, you don't interest me in any other way. Except as a model, I don't want you at all. I don't desire your companionship any more than you do mine. In fact, if your head could be detached from your body and set upon a pole in front of me while I paint, I'd be much the better pleased. However, that's not possible, so I'm going to sacrifice my comfort to ambition, trusting that the sacrifice is no greater than I already apprehend."

Sitting motionless, gazing at him with an expression of petrified abhorrence, Penelope listened, thunder-struck, to these astounding views. And so astounding did she find them that for many minutes she remained silent, marvelling at them, fascinated by the hateful-ness of them, turning them curiously this way and that in her bewildered mind.

Was it possible that this man could be sane, and yet calmly propose that two living human beings with immortal souls should sacrifice their entire lives, their happiness, perhaps their hopes of salvation, to an inanimate, soulless thing, which, so far, did not exist at all? And if not, could a madman possess a will that could dominate hers, that could produce in her this terrifying feeling of helpless confusion and fear as she visualized the inevitableness of its victory?

Or was he simply the mouthpiece of Fate—a victim like herself of a joke played on human destinies, an instrument employed to accomplish an amusing experiment with human lives? Perhaps. Had bewilderment made her superstitious and fanciful, or had superstition and fancy bewildered her? How could she know? how could she solve any enigma when she felt so confused? how could she venture to contest pronouncements when she knew not for certain whence they came? How could she elude the hateful culmination to which the man's speech had sentenced them both?

He had his work, and he loved it; so for him there would always be some slight compensation. And yet, was not that recollection influencing and hastening her decision in favour of his decree—against her will, and quite unaccountably. But—when the work was finished—when he no longer needed her co-operation?

"Your picture won't take a life-time to paint," she

muttered faintly. "But for one of us, at least, marriage will have to last through the whole of life."

Then he laughed, and let go her hands; and she realized that, unwittingly, she had surrendered to the inevitable terror—that Fate must have drugged her wits and will and so betrayed her.

CHAPTER XV

AT eight o'clock on Tuesday morning George Dufferin and Penelope were married, and afterwards returned to the flat for breakfast. In the pitchy darkness, an hour before dawn, they had started out, and as they came back the first glimmer of bleak, grey January light was visible in the sky. Gloomy and depressing as the church ceremony had been, the dull, sunless day which greeted them on its conclusion was even worse, and the home-coming and the breakfast were the most ghastly ordeals that could possibly be imposed on flagging fortitude.

As a rule Penelope's meals were served in her own room, but to-day—was it, she wondered, with a view to honouring her and the occasion?—she breakfasted with the artist in the sitting-room which communicated with the studio by double swing-doors. Like most well-intentioned arrangements, in which all the participants are not consulted, this was not a popular variation of the ordinary routine. For Dufferin, although he had directed it, obviously found it discomfiting, while Penelope's heart sank as she contemplated a prolonged *tête-à-tête* with a companion from whom, all the way home, she had been planning a speedy escape to her own room. Moreover, it was evident from the demeanour of Harriet, the artist's house-keeper, that the change met with disapproval, in token of which, and before quitting the room and slamming

the door with a protesting crash, she ostentatiously surrounded her master with all the eatables, the teapot, and every available spoon, knife, cup, and saucer, leaving the interloper's side of the table bare, except for an empty plate.

"Harriet doesn't like my being here," Penelope remarked, availing herself, as soon as the indignant housekeeper had retired to the kitchen, of a pretext for breaking an unendurable silence.

"Why shouldn't she?" Dufferin responded abstractedly.

"Does she know?"

He looked up quickly, but, for the first time since she had known him, Penelope observed that he avoided encountering her eyes.

"Know what?"

Suddenly his reason for not caring to look at her was made clear; it was because his spirit writhed with aversion and shame at any illusion to the morning's proceedings. And as he fired his ridiculously superfluous question at her, Penelope thoroughly entered into his feelings. Even to *think* of him as a husband must, she was convinced, turn her hot and cold and horror-stricken every time she looked at his face, and no doubt his experiences were and would be an exact, or possibly even an aggravated reproduction of hers.

Nevertheless, she could not resist venturing on the experiment.

"Know that we—that we are married."

"Why should she?" The artist made an uneasy movement. It was quite apparent that he was now realizing a probable miscalculation of the amount of sacrifice he was able with fortitude to endure.

" You haven't told her ? "

" No."

" But mayn't that make things a little awkward ? "

" Why should it ? There's nothing that need affect her in the—the change that's been made. That change wasn't made so that you should assume her duties or meddle with her department at all. It was made that your face might—might help my art."

How odd, to hear him mumble and falter like that ! Penelope criticized. However, she was content to finish her breakfast without any further attempt to break the embarrassing silence.

Dufferin drank some coffee, but appeared disinclined to eat, and after remaining at the table only a few minutes, jumped up and strode to the window. For some time he stood there, his back towards the room and its other occupant ; then he presently turned his head just enough to allow him to catch a glimpse of her progress out of the corner of his eye, and on perceiving her to be about to get up, he wheeled round suddenly, with the jerky movement of one who is a prey to jangled nerves.

" I'm going out," he announced. " I'm not in a mood for painting, so I'll probably not be back till late."

As soon as he had gone Penelope retreated to her own room, and going to the dressing-table shook her fist spitefully at the reflection of herself in the looking-glass.

" You're the most hideous little monster in the whole world," she informed it. " You're the worst affliction anybody could have. When you were completely mine you were bad enough, but now you're his—for that, according to him, is what to-day's mad-

ness has made you—you're beyond the beyonds. Do you know what it means to own a thing like you? It means that a man has to turn out of his home for the whole day, simply because he can't tolerate you're being in it."

Presently her glance fell on her left hand, and with wondering eyes she scrutinized the gold band on her third finger. After examining the wedding-ring for a minute, she removed it; then rummaged in a draw and discovered a piece of tape, to which she proceeded to tie it. Next she hung it round her neck, pushing it well out of sight below her collar.

"That's better," she decided, with a little sigh. "It may help me to forget now and then, and will certainly prevent the thing from becoming an unceasing reminder."

Although Dufferin was mainly accountable for what had befallen, she was far more conscious of anxiety concerning his condition of mind, both present and future, than for her own. On Sunday night, in the over-wrought state in which they then were, it had been easy enough to become convinced that both were helpless in the clutches of a remorseless Fate; but, in the chill morning light, common sense prevailed, and such illusions ceased to flourish. Unquestionably they had been the victims of something which neither could control nor withstand; but that something had been one of George Dufferin's impetuous moods, of his peculiar knack of lending a verisimilitude of important reality to some far-fetched fantasy of his brain's creating.

Of the extent of her own sacrifices, of the number of her own now vain regrets, she was vividly cognizant, but those of her fellow-victim must always remain a

wretched mystery, whose existence and misery might occasionally be revealed by his restlessness and fretful discontent. Moreover, being a man, she felt that he deserved more pity than she was inclined to bestow upon her own case, for nature had not equipped him with a fair amount of patience and endurance.

And then there was Bertie—Bertie who had pledged himself to help her "at any time and in any way"! How empty that promise was, how powerless had Bertie become to befriend her! From him she had fled, instigated by some hallucination produced by highly strung nerves, and had precipitated herself and another upon an inevitably disastrous undertaking. Why could it not have been Bertie who had subjugated her prejudices? For then, at least, one human being would have been satisfied; whereas, three were now condemned to perhaps everlasting disappointment and tribulation.

It was hard to believe that Dufferin, now his resolve had been carried into execution, still saw any necessity at all for what had been done. Yesterday, she remembered, he had informed her that the marriage would take place early, in order to save all available daylight for his work. But now he was deliberately wasting the daylight—he seemed to value it no longer. Had marriage, then, destroyed inspiration in the same manner as it had obviously destroyed his appetite for breakfast? In her concern and distress she almost forgot to bewail the irrevocable loss of her own valued liberty.

Despite the cold, she spent the whole morning in her room, where she remained undisturbed till one o'clock, until Harriet tapped at the door, opened it a few inches, and inserted her grim visage in the aperture.

"Mr. Dufferin left orders you was to 'ave lunch in the sitting-room," she announced grumpily, and her expression seemed to add, though the words were unuttered, "The world's comin' to a pretty pass and no mistake when models 'as to be waited on by respectable females, and carries on as if they was queens instead of the brazen 'uzzies I knows 'em to be."

"Thank you," Penelope responded, as the face disappeared.

Nevertheless, she sincerely wished that George Dufferin's astonishing forethought had been directed elsewhere. For if Harriet were to be kept in ignorance of the marriage, it seemed more prudent to let things proceed in their usual way. As it was, suspicions of an extremely objectionable character might be aroused in the irate housekeeper, did it appear that Penelope was being exalted to an equality with her employer without any sufficient reason for the change having been produced.

However, it could do no good to brood over side-issues like that; so when her solitary lunch was finished, she decided that a walk in the crisp, frosty air would be an advisable tonic and might revive her flagging spirits. There was now no reason why she should not go out, for even were the artist to return immediately, daylight would not serve him long; and if on his return he found her absent, he was secure in the knowledge of his right to re-capture her—supposing he wanted to, and that some other mood had replaced the one which had made his wedding breakfast such an orgy of gloom.

Accordingly, Penelope made her way to Kensington Gardens and remained there without a twinge of

conscience until dusk descended and the gates were shut; then, for another half hour, she sought distraction from the shop windows in the High Street. It was six o'clock when she got back and once more rang for admittance to Dufferin's flat.

To her surprise the door was opened with unusual alacrity by Harriet, who favoured her with an almost cordial greeting, accompanied by an expression which was, at least, less unamiable than any the model had hitherto perceived on her hard-featured face.

"There's been some changes since you went out," she announced, with unmistakable satisfaction. "We've moved you into another room."

For a moment Penelope was aghast.

Could it be that Dufferin was not going to fulfil his pledge?

But her apprehensions on this score were soon set at rest, for Harriet hurried on as if the glad tidings could not be too quickly transmitted.

"Mr. Marsham's 'ome," she explained, breathlessly triumphant. "In 'e walks while I was busy in the kitchen and couldn't 'ear the 'all door open and shut with the row I was makin', and straight for 'is room 'e goes, me still all unknowin'. Then I 'ears a yell fit to scare the dead from their graves: 'Wot the d—— do you mean by usin' my room?' 'e shouts, and in 'e jumps to the kitchen with the face of an avengin' angel. 'Use your room?' ses I. 'I ain't used no room o' yours.' 'Wot's them wimmen's cloes all over the place for then?' 'e asks, ragin' mad. 'That's Mr. Dufferin's *hindoor* model,' I tells 'im straight. 'She's bin stayin' 'ere for more'n a week, and no sign of her makin' tracks yet.' Then 'e swore somethin' 'orrible. 'Eave the rubbish out and make 'er a shake-

down in the box-room till I've fixed things different by tellin' Mr. Dufferin somethin' of wot I thinks o' these goin's on,' 'e orders. 'I'm not goin' to be made uncomfor'able by none o' Dufferin's confounded pranks.' 'You wasn't expected so soon,' I explains, anxious to sooth 'im, 'or Mr. Dufferin'd 'ave bin on better be'aviour and made arrangements.' 'Wasn't expected!' 'e roars. 'When I wrote last Wednesday to say I'd be 'ere to-day.' And no sooner 'ad 'e spoke than 'e turns round and spies a letter as 'as bin on the 'all table for days, and 'e sets to cursin' more 'orrible than ever. 'So 'e's so taken up with the damned model that 'e's no time to spare for readin' important letters,' 'e mutters, and off to the studio 'e stumps, slammin' the door be'ind 'im. And 'ere I bin all this time, settlin' the rooms and changin' the sheets and movin' wot 'e calls the rubbish, and not so much as laid eyes on 'im since. When your ring come, I was just askin' meself if I'd risk offerin' 'im some tea. That over there is the door of the room you've got, so I'll bring you a cup there presently, and a candle too, for there's no electric light, bein' never intended to be lived in."

But apparently Penelope had no intention of availing herself of the housekeeper's suggestion. While Harriet's discourse lasted, she listened to it in a silence which, to judge by her indignant expression, was anything but patient, and as it concluded she turned resolutely towards the studio door, still without uttering a word.

A moment later she was confronting a slim, middle-sized man with a short pointed beard and a sunburnt face, who at her entrance had risen from a chair by the fire, and was regarding her with a look that was frankly inquisitive.

"I'm sorry if I've inconvenienced you," Penelope said stiffly; although, under his look, she was conscious of an appreciable softening of the preconceived aversion engendered by the housekeeper's graphic description of his speech and manners. "It was not really my doing."

"You are—you are the lady who is staying here?"

It was his hesitation in selecting a phrase, more than the actual words themselves, that brought the colour mounting hotly to Penelope's cheeks and stung her to fresh resentment.

"Yes, I'm the damned model," she retorted truculently.

"I beg your pardon."

Although the stranger spoke with perfect gravity and evident sincerity, she was sure that his lips twitched, and that a gleam of laughter twinkled in his eyes. However, she did not resent his amusement. For, once more, Dufferin had suddenly been reinstated as the object of her displeasure—a position which she had not felt justified in restoring to him since the fateful night of her return from Norwood.

Why was he not here to explain matters, instead of obliging her to introduce herself to his friend in this extremely mortifying manner? Why must he choose to be out on the only occasion when his presence would be of some comfort to her? She could not explain things herself, consequently she was placed in an odiously vexatious position, owing to Mr. Marsham's ignorance of the real circumstances, and the artist's absence.

Well, the best thing was not to think about it, but to assume the air of *sang-froid* which a clear conscience entitled her to, as far at least as the proprieties which

he might expect her of outraging were concerned. If she were to betray a perception of his thoughts and probable suspicions, it would only aggravate her discomfort.

"You live here?" she remarked, advancing a couple of steps, then pausing undecidedly. "This flat is partly yours?"

"Yes. My name is Philip Marsham—perhaps Dufferin has told you," he answered, still watching her curiously and critically. "At intervals I live here. But for the last month I've been in Switzerland, and only got home an hour or so ago."

There was a momentary silence; Penelope being at a loss how to proceed, while her companion was evidently waiting for some further question.

"Won't you come to the fire?" he presently invited hospitably, after convincing himself that she had nothing more to ask. "You've been out, and it's a wretchedly raw sort of evening."

But Penelope demurred.

"Harriet will be bringing tea in a few minutes, and she told me I was to have mine in my room," she explained.

Again she fancied there was a suspicious twinkling in his eyes and twitching about his lips.

"As was unavoidable, considering that the hall is only two yards long and is just outside this door, I couldn't help overhearing Harriet's harangue, including her arrangements for tea," the man returned; and as he spoke his lips distended in a frank smile. "But I hope you'll believe me when I tell you that her account of what took place before you came in was, to put it mildly, an amazing embellishment of facts. I'd no idea Harriet had such a fertile imagination, and

I sincerely hope it has not pre-disposed you in my disfavour. However, in the matter of tea, as Harriet doesn't happen to be master here, I hope, if you can accept my apologies and believe in my innocence, that you'll demonstrate your forgiveness by having tea with me."

Before replying, Penelope scanned his face narrowly, to assure herself that his motives for the suggestion were unequivocally friendly.

"There's nothing to apologize about, and nothing for me to forgive," she at last declared. "And—of course I'd much sooner have tea here."

He was still studying her as she sat down in the chair which he drew up to the fire for her, as he had not ceased to do since her entrance, except for the brief period when her eyes had sought his with a pathetically interrogative glance.

This girl, he told himself uneasily, was not of the ordinary model type ; neither did she appear to be of the type that would voluntarily permit herself to be lured into living with a bachelor at his flat. Nevertheless, his attempts to classify her baffled him. But, in the name of sanity, not to speak of ethics and common sense, why had Dufferin installed her here ?

Although he had no means of judging Penelope except by her outward appearance and her subdued and constrained manner, he felt a strong desire to kick Dufferin the moment he returned home.

Presently he strode to the door, then paused with his hand on the knob and looked round to ask,

"By the way, what's your name ? "

"Penelope Craddock."

He nodded, opened the door, and stepped into the passage.

"Harriet!" he shouted. "Bring tea for Miss Craddock and me to the studio, will you—and look sharp."

On returning he sat down at the other side of the fire.

"I fancy Dufferin will get a shock when he finds I'm back," he remarked. "I wrote to tell him I was coming, but he apparently couldn't spare time to open my letter. Has he been very busy?"

"Only in the daylight hours, and then only when he's inspired," Penelope answered.

How different this man was from George Dufferin, she mused, and how wantonly cruel that the constraint of an unspoken but very necessary explanation must be imposed on their intercourse! The new-comer was so sociable and so normal; moreover, he appeared to lack that abominable talent for stirring up all one's worst feelings.

As Penelope answered, he suddenly leaned forward and gazed fixedly at her.

"Inspired?" he repeated. "Then—please don't think me impertinent for asking, for I don't mean to be in the least—but are you the *face*?"

Despite herself Penelope could not restrain a rueful little laugh. The question was so absurd, and had been so absurdly spoken.

"That's about all I'm supposed to be, I believe."

"It's a long time—more than two years ago, I think—since he began seeking for the face," Marsham went on meditatively. "He allowed himself no peace, and I was allowed none—unless I ran off abroad as I did this winter—since the search started. May I ask, are you the original, or only something resembling it?"

"I really don't know. Mr. Dufferin seems positive

that I'm the original—so I've gathered, at least, for I don't remember ever to have seen him until about ten days ago."

"I was there the evening he saw it. You passed us near the Marble Arch."

Penelope gave a little gasp, which expressed the sense of mingled shock and relief occasioned by this enlightenment; but as this stranger tendered it she seemed to hear another voice say "Cast your eye to your left, and then perhaps you'll acknowledge yourself wrong"; and in a flash there rose before her the vision of a pair of blue eyes meeting hers with a strangely disturbing, ardent stare. So George Dufferin had not lied, as Bertie had almost prevailed on her to believe. Of that she felt glad, though why it should matter much, or why it lifted such a weight off her mind, she could not tell.

"Was it then? He never explained."

"The minute you'd passed he vowed he'd find you again."

"And he did find me—in the small hours of the morning last Sunday week."

"*Sometimes* Dufferin gets a stroke of luck," his friend commented.

But he had no wish that she should suspect him of curiosity as to how and why her capture had at length been contrived. With the same intuition that enabled him to look indulgently on Dufferin's eccentricities, he realized that some soreness and bitterness of heart had provoked the one fragment of information she had vouchsafed, had recklessly goaded her into wording it in such a manner that he was left at liberty to judge her and her circumstances as he pleased.

Presently tea appeared, creating an opportune diver-

sion. As Harriet retired after depositing it on a small table at the farthest end of the room, Marsham, with a malicious gleam in his eyes, called her back.

"Look here—change Miss Craddock's things back to the room you took them from, and put my traps in the box-room. Be quick about it, will you?"

An imperative gesture silenced Penelope's attempts to protest, whilst Harriet was evidently too thunder-struck to utter more than a submissive "Yes, sir," as she shuffled away.

"Dufferin would chew me up, you know, if he knew what I'd done, so things must be set straight before he has the chance," he explained.

As he spoke he got up and brought the tea-table over to Penelope's side of the fire, indicating by his action that she was expected to pour out tea. While she was thus occupied there was a short silence.

"You're not an artist," Penelope said at length, delivering the words more as an assertion than a question.

"Why not?" he asked, with inward amusement noting the distinction.

"Because—oh, because—I don't know."

It struck her that he might easily have supplied the explanation which seemed to baffle her, but he refrained from doing so.

"I'm only an amateur," he instead reassured her with a smile. "Dufferin himself is really my chief hobby, and it's for that reason I live with him when I'm in town, using my amateur interest in art as an excuse for declining to do something more practical."

"Then you're not ambitious, and you don't get inspired." Unconsciously her tone was disparaging

rather than expressive of the relief she should have felt.

"No. For all that's a deplorable waste of energy and extravagant emotion, after all," he said. "Dufferin is only shadow-hunting when he pursues fame. His ambition is far in excess of his talents."

"But how can you judge that—you, *an amateur*?"

The indignation and scorn her tone conveyed was very nearly as amazing and mystifying to her listener as it was to Penelope herself; nevertheless, he answered without appearing to have noticed anything unexpected.

"As a portrait painter he would probably earn quite a fair income—if he set his mind to it," he went on, "but the 'inspiration' craze is ruining him. He does good work at portraits, and was beginning to get known and to make a name before his ambition soared too high."

"When was that?"

"Let me see. It's more than two years ago, isn't it?"

"Then it happened when he saw—the face?"

In the eyes which now gazed anxiously and earnestly into Marsham's there was a strange blending of emotions.

"You're not to blame, if that's what's worrying you," he reassured her quickly. "Like the rest of us, Dufferin's got to buy his experience his own way, and you didn't thrust the first disillusioning consignment on him. He grabbed at it himself."

"Then you don't believe he'll succeed? You really think he's wasting time that should be devoted to portrait painting, and that he's not inspired to paint a wonderful picture?"

"I'm certainly sceptical about the wonderful picture," Marsham returned. "In my humble opinion, what he calls inspiration and ambition is only a misnomer for imagination that deludes him into fancying he can do what he's not gifted to do."

"To put it quite plainly, the face is ruining his career." Though she felt as if some terrible disaster had suddenly crashed upon her, Penelope strove to speak lightly.

"Indeed, it wouldn't occur to me to put it that way," Marsham objected. "He's simply passing through a phase that'll do him no end of good, and you're the means of putting him through it, apparently. It'll be interesting for us both to see how he comes out of it. The artistic temperament is an extraordinarily interesting study, you know."

"But I shall feel like a fraud—I do feel like a fraud now—sitting here for hours making him waste his time."

Of the anguish which possessed her, that was all she dared express; but the soul, whose shadow Marsham recognized in her eyes, was crying out piteously: "Why couldn't you have come last night and told me? Why didn't I know before it was too late?"

"His time won't be wasted," Marsham assured her, with a confidence which, on account of her superior knowledge of the actual circumstances, failed to convey the least comfort.

"Could he not be persuaded to start portraits again, and perhaps to divide his time between them and the other thing?" she presently suggested, wistfully hopeful.

But she got no reply, for her companion's entire

attention appeared suddenly to have been transferred to some sound outside.

"There he is. Well, anyway we've managed to get some tea in comfort, before he could swoop on us and spoil our appetites and digestions by insisting on getting our wits overworked on the latest shadow-hunt," he remarked, as a quick tread sounded in the passage and the handle of the studio door rattled under the touch of an impatient hand.

"Hallo!" Dufferin exclaimed, traversing the room in two strides and stopping in front of his friend, a smile of pleasure lighting up his face. "So you're back."

"Looks something like it, I fancy."

As he made the nonchalant reply, Marsham turned towards Penelope. For with a resentment almost equal to her own, he had observed how completely Dufferin had ignored her presence.

"Miss Craddock has been entertaining me," he added, "and the time has passed so pleasantly that I'd forgotten your existence until now."

"Miss Craddock?" Dufferin glanced about him inquiringly, his gaze finally happening to light upon Penelope. "Oh, yes," he mumbled vaguely.

Penelope resolutely fixed her eyes upon the tea-table, thus concealing the flash of hostility which Dufferin's indifference was prone to kindle in them. Nevertheless, she realized the unreasonableness of resenting his forgetfulness of her name; for he had never attempted to ascertain what it was, and she could not tell whether he had even glanced at the signature which, this morning, she had written for the last time.

After waiting a couple of minutes she got up and retired to her room, leaving the two men to talk undis-

turbed. For some mysterious reason it was evident that Marsham did not want her to go, or, at least, so she suspected ; but this attitude of his only made her position all the more insupportable. While she remained, it struck her that he was deliberately experimenting with Dufferin and herself by means of luring them into conversation, manœuvring so that they were obliged to address each other directly, striving to extract from one or other some clue as to their actual relationship. And to aggravate matters, Dufferin obviously shared her suspicions, and appeared almost as distressingly self-conscious and ill-at-ease as he had been at breakfast-time.

To the outsider, of course, she reasoned, the whole thing, as far as he knew of it, was only farcical. For he was unaware of that travesty of a wedding, or of the heavy cloud of irrevocability which was all it had brought them, and which now cast such an oppressive gloom over both their lives. He knew nothing of the sacrifice, the tardy realization of whose uselessness weighed on one of them as a burden too heavy to be borne.

" Oh, the future—the future—the future ! " Penelope shuddered, when once she found herself alone. " But, thank God, one can't pierce its obscurity ! "

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN the door had closed behind the retreating Penelope, Marsham produced a pipe, filled it, and lit it, and for a few seconds smoked in thoughtful silence. Then with sudden impatience, he turned on his companion.

"For the love of Heaven, man, will you sit down and keep still, and stop fidgiting like a bear on hot bricks" he exploded irascibly. "If I was a woman I'd have developed nerves long ago, simply through having to put up with a creature who's apparently charged with electricity and hops and stamps about behind me whenever I want a minute's peace."

With uncharacteristic tractability Dufferin immediately checked his restless pacing of the floor.

"You've got the whole hearth blocked up," he grumbled peevishly.

"There's a vacant chair for you—what's wrong with it?" Marsham indicated the one on which Penelope had lately been sitting.

Dufferin eyed it for an instant with an odd expression of dubiousness and dissatisfaction, then made a sudden plunge to the door, shouted for Harriet to remove the tea-things, and, when this order has been executed, pushed forward a low stool and set it where the table had been.

With the keenest interest, mingled with a good deal of amusement, Marsham surveyed all these movements.

"Your latest fad isn't microbes, is it?" he inquired anxiously as the artist sat down.

"Microbes? Why?"

"Because you're so shy of a chair that someone else has been sitting on."

Save for a grunt Dufferin vouchsafed no rejoinder, but proceeded to make himself as comfortable as his comfortless seat would permit, propping his elbows on his knees, and gripping his unkempt head firmly between his hands, while he vigorously puffed at a cigarette.

"Had a decent time?" he at length inquired, obviously with reference to his friend's foreign trip.

"First class," Marsham responded. "But I'm not in the humour to describe it just now. I've something more interesting to talk about."

"Talk away, then." This permission was delivered in a tone of supreme indifference.

"Well, first of all, I'd like to know why, no matter whether her face promotes inspiration or otherwise, you have the rascality—I can't find a more appropriate word at present—to induce Miss Craddock to live here alone with you?"

Without displaying the least sign of umbrage at the epithet applied to his conduct, Dufferin smoked for a second or two before replying.

"There's no lady of that name here, that I know of," he observed at length.

Marsham made an impatient movement.

"Oh, of course, I know that to you she's only a face; but to other people she's a woman with a name that should be kept in good repute. Moreover, she's not only a woman consisting of a face and a body, but also of a mind and soul—and a reputation which is

seriously jeopardized by your extraordinarily disordered ethics."

"For the sake of argument, we'll admit that the face has all these accessories," Dufferin rejoined with amazing imperturbability. "But I, at least, am prepared to dispute that the last mentioned is imperilled as you say."

Springing impetuously to his feet, Marsham confronted the speaker.

"Good Lord, man, she's not that sort!" he exclaimed indignantly. "You, who've made such an ass of yourself over her face, must realize that by now. She's not the sort of girl that's beyond being injured by living alone with a bachelor artist—alone, except for a crusty old housekeeper who's already judged and condemned her as the rest of the world presently will."

"I'm not a bachelor," Dufferin calmly corrected.

"Heaven alone knows what you *think* you are!" Marsham retorted. "Though I'm growing inclined to describe you as a scoundrel of the most unscrupulously selfish type."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm a married man."

In delivering this astounding piece of intelligence the artist did not even trouble to discard his assumed air of *sang-froid*, in order to substitute for it the one of triumphantly conscious virtue, which its nature and undeniable power to clinch the argument certainly warranted.

And undoubtedly its effect was a triumph, to judge by the dumbfounded expression with which his companion regarded him for some moments after it had been produced.

"Married?" Marsham repeated at last. "Why—and to whom—and how?"

Symptoms of uneasiness now for the first time manifested themselves in Dufferin's demeanour. He shifted the position of his hands so that instead of grabbing his hair they partially concealed his face, keeping his eyes meanwhile resolutely on the fire, with the evident desire to avoid the other's analytical gaze ; at the same time he uttered some inarticulate sound, not unlike an embarrassed laugh.

"One damned impertinent question, anyway" he presently commented, "and two others that any man of average intelligence might easily answer for himself."

"You married *her*—Miss Craddock?"

"That's the answer to the second one," Dufferin checked it off by tapping his fore-finger on the side of his nose.

"And the others?"

"I married her in a church in the orthodox way."

"That's not the 'how' I meant," Marsham objected irritably. "How did you ever prevail on her to marry you at all?"

Dufferin shrugged his shoulders.

"In the end she was perfectly reasonable about it, and appeared to grasp how essential it was for the sake of my work that she should become my undisputed belonging."

"And that answers the 'why' as well, I presume."

As he spoke, Marsham resumed his seat, and sought relief for the feelings of disgust and contempt which his tone so eloquently expressed, by energetically puffing his at pipe.

"There was no ring on her finger," he remarked presently.

"Wasn't there? I didn't notice that, but I'm

positive I got a ring, for the parson would have kicked up a row if I hadn't, I fancy. Yes, I remember now—I saw it on her at breakfast. I wonder what she's done with it."

Again Marsham stared at him, as if horror-stricken by, yet scarcely able to credit, his apparent callousness.

"She still calls herself Penelope *Craddock*," he pursued presently.

But Dufferin seemed to be absolutely unconscious of the suspicion implied by his friend's two last comments.

"Oh, well, I expect that was her real name," he returned indifferently. "There'd be no object in her putting a wrong one down in the book in the vestry."

"Before you came in, I talked to her for nearly an hour, and during that time she never let drop the smallest hint that the relationship between you was anything but that of painter and model—or inspired and inspiration."

"Probably she'd forgotten—and anyway, that's right, for no other relationship does or will exist. The inspiration, which it amuses you to sneer at, reduces most other things to insignificance. Yes, she'd be bound to forget."

"I expect she wishes she could," his friend retorted venomously.

CHAPTER XVII

LATER ON, Marsham sometimes wondered if the artist's surmise could actually have been correct, and that Penelope had really forgotten her wedding ring and all that it symbolized ; if that were not so, he decided, her bearing towards Dufferin must be instigated by wounded pride and by an ever-present realization of the tragic blunder into which he had dragged her. In order to seek a correct solution for this problem, he elected to remain in the studio on the day after his return, and so pursue his investigations, feeling as he did so very much like a spectator at a play with an unusually intricate plot.

As opportunely happened, inspiration gripped Dufferin early that morning, driving him to his easel the instant there was sufficient daylight for his work, permitting him attention for nothing save his canvas and his model, and bringing to his eyes that concentrated, visionary look that suggested to the beholder that they were unable to focus on any near or mundane object.

Even though at subsequent sittings Penelope was often inclined to agree with the exasperated artist's opinions as to the vexing effect of common-sense views as expressed by the mediocre majority, she was at first grateful for the presence of a third person, and found Marsham a decided acquisition. For both to-day, and on very many later occasions, he conscientiously

performed the part of the much-needed safety-valve, relieving her of the embarrassment accompanying her realization of a total inability to adapt herself to the difference in her position, relieving her also of the doubtfully pleasant necessity of venting the irritation she could often scarcely restrain at Dufferin's apparent oblivion to difference or change, as evidenced by the complete restoration of his normal air of freedom from self-consciousness.

By Marsham that first morning was spent in roaming round the studio, and creating constant diversions by baiting the artist in a manner that would have warmed the heart of his bitterest foe, chaffing him as far as, and sometimes beyond, the limits of his endurance, criticizing his work, tendering absurd advice upon it, and now and then even venturing the length of deliberately provoking the model to laughter.

Yesterday, or on any previous day, Penelope knew that such disrespectful levity might have exasperated her also ; but now, for the first half-hour and before the novelty of the distraction began to pall, she was fully convinced that, not only for to-day, but for to-morrow and for all the to-morrows, she must consider it entirely justifiable and salutary—because her work and Dufferin's work was merely the fostering of an hallucination, a waste of time and talent, the probable destruction of a career. To mock at him was really the greatest kindness. Sympathy, bestowed to-day, would not soften to-morrow's disillusionment. Probably his friend's treatment was the most merciful after all.

"Have you thought of a subject for the masterpiece?" Marsham inquired, as he watched the artist hoist a huge canvas upon the easel. Then, addressing

Penelope, "This time he must mean business, Miss Craddock; otherwise he'd not dream of using such miles of stuff.

Dufferin scowled darkly, but made no rejoinder; while, in order to obtain a glimpse of the object which had evoked Marsham's speculations, Penelope moved her head stiffly.

"Keep still!"

"Oh, tut, tut! In my pinafore days my instructors would have remarked 'it wants a word' if I'd spoken as rudely as that," Marsham interposed. "But now, to return to more hopeful subjects than Dufferin's manners (which are past praying for, I fear), hadn't we better set about thinking of a name for the picture? 'Patience on a Monument smiling at Grief' might do. What do you say, Miss Craddock?"

But this time Penelope did not venture to applaud him, so before returning to the charge he sighed heavily, as though deploring the weight of responsibility which now apparently devolved upon him alone.

"We must hunt up someone to represent Grief," he went on. "What about Harriet now?—Harriet's face at a moment when she's driven to distraction by her master's latest vagary is surely the personification of anguish too bitter to be borne. By Jove! I'll call her in now and find out at once how she likes the idea. You won't mind having her to sit opposite to you, Miss Craddock, or feel discouraged because she can't respond to your patient smile? Try to fortify yourself with the recollection that it's all in a good cause."

As he finished speaking he made a dart towards the door, apparently with the design of carrying his threat into execution; but when his exasperated victim

dashing his stick of charcoal on the floor, sprang up with a smothered imprecation, he came to a sudden standstill.

"Clear out of this!" Dufferin commanded fiercely. "Be off to where you'll be less of a nuisance than you are here. Loafers are all very well lounging about the houses of their own species, so clear off to where your wit's appreciated and before I do you a mischief!"

With a comically mortified air Marsham moved away from the door.

"I'm certain Miss Craddock wants me to stay," he objected. "Besides, I'm inclined to think that if I went away she'd be asphyxiated by this inspired atmosphere."

"Don't dare to notice him," Dufferin admonished sharply, with a suspicious glance in Penelope's direction as he resumed his seat.

"Miss Craddock is bored stiff—or would be if I wasn't here to put a bit of real life into things," Marsham argued imperturbably.

"Clear out!"

"Do you really feel as if you could beat it, Miss Craddock?"

Then, turning to Dufferin with a malicious smile:

"Miss Craddock and I sympathize deeply with one another, having a common sorrow," he explained. "You see, we're both normal, rational sort of creatures, though doomed by an unkind fate to be the victims of inspiration. Consequently I'd not dream of complying with your wishes, my friend, until I was perfectly satisfied that they were also those of my fellow-sufferer."

Except for another scowl Dufferin paid no heed to

this last impertinence. He stood waiting for the interrupter to retire and let him resume his work, evincing his impatience by tapping on his canvas with the fresh piece of charcoal with which he was already prepared.

"*Shall* I clear out, Miss Craddock ? "

For answer Penelope made a scarcely perceptible motion of her head.

An instant later Dufferin uttered a grunt of satisfaction.

"Thank God !" he ejaculated fervently, more as if he were thinking aloud than addressing the other occupant of the studio. "For I'm in the humour to-day ! "

"But I'm not in the humour ; and even if I ever was before, I'm certain I shall never be again," Penelope's unuttered thoughts made answer.

On his return to the flat, however, some hours later, Marsham found the model alone, her owner having gone out as soon as the daylight faded.

"So you're resting after your arduous labours ? " he remarked in greeting, as he sat down opposite to her by the fire.

"Yes," she answered listlessly.

"You're tired ? "

She made a slightly impatient gesture of denial.

"How could sitting still really tire anybody ? " she parried.

"Of course it can. And the only way to get rested is to go out and take exercise and see what's going on."

This time her only reply was a repetition of her former gesture.

"Suppose I take you out to-morrow ? If you won't

do it by yourself, somebody else must make you," he suggested.

But Penelope shook her head.

"I don't know if I might. It was different—my going out yesterday. But to-day—and to-morrow as well—Mr. Dufferin says he's in the humour . . ."

She broke off quickly, realizing that she was on the verge of divulging to a stranger the inconceivable extent of her loss of liberty, and of, perhaps, supplying him with unlimited matter for speculation.

"Blow Dufferin's humour!" his friend ejaculated irreverently. "Self-denial will do him no end of good, so I'll see that he sets you free even *before* his blessed daylight's gone. What time did he knock off work to-day?"

"Three o'clock."

"Then we'll go out at two, to-morrow."

"Perhaps it would be better not to make plans before we see if——" again she checked herself hastily, feeling, this time, unaccountably sensitive of Marsham's ridicule of the artist's vagaries.

"Wait and see if he's got such a bad attack of inspiration that he mayn't be safe to approach on mundane natters?" Marsham demanded with a derisive laugh. "No, we'll do nothing of the kind. Whether he's agreeable or not we'll be off, and, as I've hinted before, I've no doubt that a little privation will do his over-fed artistic soul an uncommon amount of good."

"Then you must arrange about it. I couldn't."

"I know that, and I'll be only too delighted to take on the job," he replied, now surreptitiously scrutinizing her, with a curious, speculative regard. "It'll give me the greatest pleasure in the world to spring it

on him as a surprise, and to witness the effect of the shock on his whole outfit of failings—artistic temperament, vanity, and pig-headed conviction that everybody should take his crazes as seriously as he does himself.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE following morning dawned bright and clear, and therefore most unfavourably for Penelope's projected outing ; for the light was exactly what the artist required, and at an early hour he announced his resolve of availing himself of it as long as it lasted. Inspiration had apparently roused him from his sleep with the first streak of day-break, and as time wore on it showed no sign of abating energy. He had commenced his masterpiece, and his absorption in it made him to all appearances oblivious to everything else in the whole world.

They had breakfasted early, Marsham immediately afterwards leaving the flat, while Dufferin and his model resumed their different positions in the studio without delay. Penelope being—or, at least, appearing to be—in a docile and tractable frame of mind, the artist found every inducement to carry on his work indefinitely, growing so enthralled that the face outlined on his canvas became more of a reality to him than its living original ; save for it, his environment was completely blotted out, as both body and brain surrendered to the demands of ambition and that which he believed to be genius.

By twelve o'clock, however, Penelope was becoming disagreeably conscious of several physical discomforts, and by one she was convinced that if this sort of thing were prolonged for many more minutes it would

grow insupportable. Not only was she hungry, but her limbs were cramped, both her feet had gone asleep, and her hands felt as if they would presently turn to lumps of ice. But still Dufferin worked on, heedless of her condition, only now and then glancing in her direction with that oddly detached expression, which always gave the impression that he was surveying something in no way appertaining to her actual self.

As the clock chimed the half-hour, her spirits momentarily revived, for Harriet immediately thrust her head in at the studio door.

"Wot time do you want lunch?" she inquired.

Without answering, Dufferin waved his palette in an impatient signal of dismissal, seemingly intended to include both Harriet and the meal in question.

But this was too much, and the bitterness of her disappointment overcame Penelope's patient acquiescence and self-control. She sighed audibly, and gave herself a dissatisfied shake.

"Stay still!" Dufferin muttered, though obviously too engrossed to exert himself to pay much attention to her movements.

"I can't," she declared peevishly.

Without evincing any sign of having heard her, the artist continued his work, and for a second or two longer she waited, loath, despite her own wretchedness, to spoil a fool's paradise. For his sake, she was even anxious that it should be preserved as long as possible, because it entailed less misery for them both that he should continue to dream the dream that could never materialize.

Nevertheless, a few minutes later she sighed again, and, this time quite unconsciously, altered her position,

turning her eyes towards him. For four and a half hours he had been standing in front of his easel, and curiosity impelled her to ascertain whether the strain had left no mark of fatigue upon him.

To her amazement and relief he still continued his work as if he had not noticed her, his entire attention being evidently concentrated on the movements of his own hand. So, for quite a long while, as it seemed to her, she watched him thus, yet without once attracting his glance towards her.

Presently hunger and cold became almost forgotten in her interest in his complete obliviousness of all save that which his brush created, in speculations as to whither his thoughts had wandered, and if he had found supreme happiness in a world of his own fancy.

But finally her interest became so intense that it urged her to experiment ; accordingly she yawned, with quite unnecessary vigour. But even that inharmonious sound did not disturb him, nor so much as cause him to lift his eyes. Encouraged by this result, she got up softly, and moved stealthily to a part of the room in which, were he to glance in the direction of the place where he expected her to be, he would fail to see her. Here she waited, feeling almost aggrieved that she could provoke no outburst from him, yet fascinated by the same fascination which kept his gaze riveted, which rendered her or any outside thing so powerless to distract him.

"How easy to slip away without his knowing!" she reflected.

The swing doors between the studio and the other room would, she knew, open and close without sound, if gently treated. Accordingly she edged towards them, glancing now and then at Dufferin to satisfy

herself that her movements were still unobserved. On reaching the doors, she noiselessly pushed them open, slipped through, and let them swing back softly behind her.

But no sooner had she accomplished this than a loud crash sounded from the studio, succeeded immediately by a quick impatient step, and in an instant the doors were flung open, and she was confronted by the artist—not angrily, however, as she had expected, but with a dazed, hurt look, as if some sudden shock had stunned and confused him.

"Come back," he said, in a tone which was also quite free from passion, and was scarcely raised above a whisper.

As she looked up at his bewildered face, Penelope burst out laughing.

"I didn't think you'd heard me," she said.

"Neither did I, but I knew you had gone."

"How?"

"Because I couldn't get on with my work."

"But you didn't seem to need me. If you could work on without looking at me, and while I was fidgeting about, why should you want me to go back?"

Still he manifested no sign of anger.

"I was getting so horribly tired, and I wanted the lunch you refused so badly. I *couldn't* have kept still a minute longer," she went on, his passive demeanour impelling her to offer some sort of explanation and apology.

"I only refused lunch for myself. Why couldn't you have spoken up and said you were hungry?"

"Because I was so sure you'd fly into a rage—that you'd not only declare that I must starve, but use bad language about it into the bargain," she

retorted, " — even commit some act of violence, as you did the other day."

Dufferin neither smiled, nor attempted to contradict her.

"Come back," he repeated, pushing the door open to its widest extent.

Without demur Penelope complied, but after crossing the threshold she came to a halt.

"For nearly five hours I've been sitting on a hard seat, miles away from the fire," she expostulated. "Surely, for once at least, you might drag yourself down from the clouds and try to realize that human endurance has its limits."

To her astonishment the artist instantly crossed over to the hearth and pressed his fingers on the bell.

"So, for once, you're going to be humane!" Penelope's gratitude and relief were not quite sufficient to compel her to withhold her triumphant comment.

"So long as you stay here you can sit where you like, and stuff for all you're worth," he informed her, but with a note of weariness in his tone. Then, as Harriet's head reappeared: "Bring lunch for—for Miss Craddock," he directed.

Then he returned to his easel, leaving the partially released model to gaze into the fire and commune with her own thoughts; and for these he had also provided, supplying them lavishly with the absorbing subject of this amazing change in his demeanour and speculations as to how it had been occasioned.

And he was her husband! Now that he became more of a stranger every hour, it was so much harder to realize that! Tuesday's proceedings, too, seemed now so remote—the happenings of scarcely remembered bygone years, or else the memory of a frightful

dream. Had he himself entirely forgotten—had inspiration blotted out the miserable recollection—and was that why the awkwardness of constant association with her no longer appeared to distress him? She hoped so—yes, she was quite convinced that she sincerely hoped so—and to be enabled to believe it would relieve her mind of a load which had weighted it down to the lowest depths of depression ever since she had heard his friend's views on his character and qualifications. And if he had forgotten, she too might easily forget such a preposterous folly—might persuade herself that anything so preposterous could only be the figment of an excited brain.

However, if he could go on painting without requiring to look at her, how could he even pretend that he still needed her as a model? Over and over again, during the first days of their acquaintance, had he not impressed upon her with quite unnecessary candour that he regarded her solely as the tiresome proprietor of a face which—by some freak of fancy it was impossible to account for—he had resolved to acquire as the one specially designed to be the model for his masterpiece.

But now, whether he honestly acknowledged it or not, he had no further use for the one desirable attribute he would admit she possessed—the only thing about her with which he considered it worth his while to become intimate. Could it be that he was on the eve of realizing fully the insanity of his impetuous action?

Presently, as her doubts increased, her thoughts sped forward, and suspense became insufferable, forcing her to determine on an attempt to bring it to an end, even though that should precipitate further

disquieting disclosures. For the sake of his comfort it appeared necessary ; for the success of his career ; for the security of her own self-esteem.

Taking the poker she stirred the fire, hoping that the sound might provoke him to a protest which would serve as an opening for controversy. But after waiting in palpitating expectation for some seconds, she speedily perceived that her ruse was a failure. No sound, except the soft, intermittent, swishing noise made by the artist's brush could be heard from behind the immense canvas.

"As you don't mind interruptions, I suppose I may talk?" she was suddenly astounded by hearing herself demand irritably.

"Talk if you like, as long as you don't expect me to answer," came the tranquil, though discouragingly abstracted reply.

"But I do—I do—I do!"

Evidently the vehemence of her speech was so startlingly unanticipated that it really did disturb him, for the sounds from behind the canvas now proclaimed that the artist's unusual tranquillity was being rapidly superceded by the characteristic impatience with which she was most familiar. Down went the palette with a clatter, his brush rattled on the floor, and with a quick, agitated movement he tore himself from his interrupted work, and in a moment was standing before her, denunciation flashing from his blue eyes.

"In the name of all that's reasonable, couldn't you have the gratitude to leave me in peace when I'm doing so much for you? What's the matter? Is it Harriet's not hurrying with your lunch? Then why the mischief don't you ring the bell again?"

Without waiting for her to act on this suggestion he spun round and himself pressed the button.

"I wish you'd not done that," Penelope remonstrated. "I'd almost forgotten lunch, because—because I wanted to talk."

He scowled at her ferociously.

"What do you want to talk about?"

She hesitated, longing to learn the meaning of his inconsistencies, yet reluctant to betray her curiosity.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you," she said at last.

"It never struck me that one sound could put you out when another didn't."

"Your voice could."

Had she not felt so perplexed, the bitterness, disgust, and scorn expressed in those three words would have forced her to laugh.

"Is my voice so very disagreeable?" she inquired humbly.

"I'm sure I don't know what it's like, except that it annoys me."

"Well, you should have cautioned me about that before."

But her eyes were now twinkling maliciously; and the temptation to torment him had returned, making her momentarily forgetful of Tuesday's calamitous episode.

"You know you never complained of that before," she went on. "So how was I to guess that my voice was annoying? You never even hinted at having noticed I had a voice, or anything worthy of observation except a face."

"And isn't that enough?" Disparagement, even of her face, was now plainly depicted on his, as he

cast one withering glance at it, then hastily averted his eyes.

"No ; I shouldn't have thought so."

"You shouldn't think at all."

"May I talk then—without thinking ? "

With a gesture indicative of a tragic farewell to all peace and comfort, he shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

"Oh, by all means. Say what you've got to say, for heaven's sake, and have done with it ! "

"Then, first of all, for the sake of preventing unnecessary argument, I'll agree that I've only got a face, and that it's all I've a right to, all I was ever meant to have, and quite enough to get me along. But then, why, if that's so, and you think it's so, did you call me back just now, when you didn't need my face and hadn't been looking at it ? "

At this reminder of an occurrence which was possibly as much of a mystery to himself as to his questioner, Dufferin's brow contracted in a puzzled frown.

"If I tried to explain, I don't believe you'd understand," he said uneasily.

"Probably not ; because I don't believe you know your own reasons for anything—supposing you have any—well enough to be able to make an understandable explanation," Penelope retorted.

For a whole minute there was silence, Dufferin staring abstractedly before him, while Penelope cast occasional surreptitious glances at his averted face.

"Have you finished with me ? "

The suddenness and unexpectedness of the question made Dufferin jump with an odd, startled movement, as though it were a missile hurled at him and by which he narrowly escaped being struck.

"When I have I'll let you know," he mumbled, without looking at her.

"But you mightn't care to."

"And why not, pray?"

This time it was Penelope's turn to be startled and taken aback.

How on earth was she to give a direct, straight answer to this direct and straight question, when the only things that might be said to make matters clear were rendered ridiculously impossible on account of the unspoken, mutual understanding that any allusion to Tuesday morning's deplorable farce must at all costs be avoided.

"You—you might think you should spare my feelings," she faltered, after an instant's hesitation.

Then he turned his face to her, and the colour mounted hotly to her cheeks as she saw his lips distend into a supercilious grin.

"And why do you fancy such an idea should occur to me?" he inquired blandly.

Penelope was nonplussed; yet in spite of or possibly on account of her discomfiture, she hated him at that moment with all the virulence of which she was capable.

What thoughts were concealed behind that horrid enigmatic grin, she asked herself angrily. Was he trying to convince himself that the suggestion had been a possible change in his feelings towards her, that she was even now preparing the further suggestion of a difference of treatment, to which she was entitled, and which might now be accorded to her at once? Was he flattering himself (oh, hateful, most hateful of thoughts!) that she coveted the position to be obtained by his recognition of her as his wife?

"I think I'll have a try at getting on with my work, so I'll be grateful if you'd let me have some peace."

Penelope vouchsafed no assurance, miserably aware as she was, and convinced, moreover, as to how exultantly aware he must be, of the already too adequate reason for unbroken silence; neither did she venture to look at him, as he strode past her and disappeared behind the screen of canvas.

Where was the use of talking to him, of striving to break through the hideous barrier of constraint, in hope of arriving at some understanding of his point of view? she reflected bitterly. Where was the use of trying to discover what he thought or felt or wanted, when, in all probability, everything in him was quite uninteresting, lukewarm, and unimpressible—all, that is to say, that was not entirely dedicated to his art? Very likely she was right when she had decided that he retained no recollection of that gruesome marriage ceremony; with a person of his character any faint impression made by that incident might already have had time to fade completely from the mind. In trying to approach the subject she had accomplished nothing except a considerable aggravation of her own distress.

Still, if only she could hold firmly to the belief that he had forgotten, some comfort might be derived from it. At present, however, it was not quite sufficiently established to prove of much utility. Its failures to relieve her recurred more frequently every hour, never permitting her to rid herself of the suspicion that the mere fact of her own existence was a menace to his career, that he felt himself fettered by it—fettered to a woman he could scarcely tolerate; that presently

he would shake off the delusion which now obscured a thorough estimate of the folly of which they must both be the lifelong victims.

So deeply immersed had she become in these dreary broodings that not only the appointment for two o'clock, but her recent hunger and the lunch that was so tardy in arriving to appease it, had entirely slipped from her memory. Accordingly, when the door was suddenly flung open, revealing both Marsham and Harriet, arriving simultaneously to afford her distraction, she sprang up with a startled exclamation, staring at them in stupefied amazement.

Without a word of apology for the length of time she had taken in appearing with it, Harriet deposited her tray on a small table and immediately retired, while Marsham advanced to the middle of the room and surveyed Penelope reproachfully.

"Hallo!" he said. "So you're not ready yet. Hadn't we better start?"

This fresh interruption evoked an angry ejaculation from the artist; and it was this sound, far more than Marsham's reminder, which instantly roused Penelope, instigating in her a purely revengeful desire to depart with all possible haste.

"I've been wondering if you were ever coming," she responded, with an affectation of the most heart-felt relief. "If you'd waited another minute I think I'd have died of sheer boredom—the morning's been so interminably long."

"Then get your things—quick."

Some reflection of Penelope's look showed in Marsham's face as he gave the injunction, but with him amusement was mingled with vindictiveness.

"What's this?"

Again Dufferin had emerged from behind his canvas, and with evident suspicion was now eyeing them by turns.

"Miss Craddock promised me a share of her society this afternoon," his friend informed him nonchalantly. "You see, we're agreed in the opinion that a prolonged spell of yours isn't wholesome for temperaments which prefer to remain rational, and that some occasional variety is necessary to counteract any evil consequences."

"Miss Craddock has told me nothing about this appointment, but has ordered lunch here—and there it is." Dufferin waved his brush in the direction of the tray, then turned his back on the interloper, as much as to say that the subject was now closed to further discussion.

Marsham's eyes followed the gesture and surveyed the tray disparagingly.

"Coffee and buttered toast," he remarked with a grimace. "Sumptuous fare for inspired monomaniacs, no doubt, but—well, I fancy I can invite her to something more satisfying to a famished, sane, human being."

"While there's light she has to stay here; I can't allow her to go," Dufferin announced authoritatively.

At this shameless example of his effrontery Penelope was goaded to active rebellion, and she flashed a defiant look upon him.

"That's rubbish!" she declared. "For you've not looked at me once, and have even let me sit with my back to you for the last half-hour, with that thing"—pointing a scornful finger at the canvas—"screening me off all the time. To pretend I'm

needed for the hour's daylight that's left is ludicrously unreasonable."

Dufferin wheeled sharply round, and for a second glared at her in silence ; then :

" Will you please to remember that you're in my employment, and that it's customary to ask the employer's leave if you want to go out during working hours ? "

The inconceivable impertinence of this speech only spurred Penelope to more reckless defiance.

" Possibly," she retorted. " But I'm not altogether your slave, you know. And, even if I am going without leave, you've always the consolation that you've the right to set about retrieving me if I seem like not coming back."

In her indignation she had momentarily forgotten Marsham's presence ; but as his voice presently reminded her of it she felt suddenly mortified and remorseful.

After all, Dufferin *was* the man she had vowed to honour—almost incredible realization !—and no matter how often her thoughts might betray her into disloyal avowals of hatred for him, it was odious to flout him in the presence of a third person.

" Gently, my children, gently," the third person was at that moment adjuring in soothing tones. " Please to recollect that there's nothing in this world that's really worth getting agitated about."

But, like Penelope's repentance, the injunction had come too late ; for, before her impetuous speech had even reached its conclusion the artist had turned away, and as she now surveyed his broad back she perceived something in its aspect which smote her heart almost to the point of relenting ; something which made her

victory appear ignoble, which told her of a self-restraint whose achievement must be a torture to him.

An instant later, her thoughts were again diverted by Marsham.

"Go and get on your things," he said, appearing to have forgotten, or else to be determined to ignore, the result of the dispute. "I'll meet you in front of the lift."

Not until they were gone did Dufferin turn round, and then it was to commence pacing backwards and forwards with the impatient restlessness of a caged lion.

Nevertheless, despite his apparent inattention to their departure from the studio, he paused to listen when, after about five minutes had elapsed, Penelope's step sounded in the passage, when the hall door clicked behind her, and the gates of the lift opened and closed with noisy clangs. After that, he stood perfectly rigid, his head projecting slightly forward, in an attitude of strained vigilance, his eyes fixing their penetrating, far-sighted gaze on the studio door, as if they had power to pierce the woodwork, traverse the hall beyond, pass through the outer door, and follow the lift in its descent.

For some time he stood thus ; then with a gesture in which mortification was intermingled with his characteristic impatience he hurled himself away, and, possibly with a view to seeking consolation, turned again to his picture.

But he was apparently in no humour to resume work ; for he remained standing idly before the canvas, in exactly the same attitude as that in which he had listened to Penelope's departure, his eyes alone suggesting a difference ; for now his look was that of

a man roughly awakened from a long, sound sleep, and whose brain, though still dazed with dreaming, was rapidly returning to conscious realization of actualities. Nor was it the same look with which he usually followed the movements of his paint brush, or with which he afterwards investigated the work the brush had accomplished. For at present Dufferin's gaze was fixed critically on a near object, tangible and mundane, was no longer straying off to visit a land of misty visions.

And the amazing reality which held him spell-bound was a face—was the study of a face, executed in oils, and portrayed floating about, entirely unhampered by the inconvenience and bulk of a body—floating in what was apparently intended to represent a measureless expanse of opalescent haze.

As he scrutinized it he grinned sardonically. He had no doubts as to what it was. He recognized it instantly. This thing depicted on his canvas was the material facsimile of an insensate imagination. It was not beautiful, it was not a work of art, it was not even a good likeness of his model. It was merely the result of an illusory inspiration.

Presently he stooped, picked up a piece of dirty rag, dipped it in a tin of turpentine, and rubbed it all over the fantastic daub which had been his obsession for so many days, the achievement of which had dominated all other desires for so many months.

When his work of destruction was complete only a ghostly outline of a face remained, looming dimly through a vast, ugly smudge of nondescript colour.

CHAPTER XIX

FORTUNATELY for Penelope, she had not wasted a single minute of her dreary morning in pleasurable anticipation of the promised outing. For she did not and could not enjoy it; with the result that, only two hours after leaving the flat, she pleaded fatigue and begged permission to return. Nevertheless, she was aware only of moral sufferings, of an acute *malaise* occasioned by a surfeit of revenge.

These experiences she was readily induced to regard as a judgment upon her for her ruthless desire for and infliction of vengeance. For she certainly had utilized her opportunity ruthlessly, as her conscience was forcing her to recognize, even before she sallied forth, apparently so triumphant, yet in reality abjectly repentant at having availed herself too eagerly of the artist's discomfiture. Now, despite a still faintly smouldering resentment, which the least provocation, she knew, might fan into flame at a moment's notice, she was quite ready to acknowledge that her conduct merited censure.

In this chastened frame of mind she bid farewell to Marsham, who had accompanied her in a taxi as far as the main entrance, and, just as it was growing dark, entered the hall of the flat and paused for a moment to ponder what her next move should be, and to listen to any sound from the studio which might help towards a speedy decision.

Somebody was talking in the studio ! Could Dufferin be entertaining friends, or was he interviewing some other model ? Undoubtedly that was his voice, although the subdued and courteous quality of its tone, as it reached her through the closed door, was so unfamiliar that it was astonishing.

What should she do ?

After waiting an instant she turned away and moved a few paces in the direction of her bedroom, then paused again.

How ridiculous that she should feel the least hesitation ! Who could dare to dispute her right to go anywhere she chose in this place ? If she was not, at least she *should* be, mistress here, and hostess at any entertainment the artist gave. She was his wife !

With an affectation of daring resolution she turned back, her head held high, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining defiance, and seized the door-knob of the studio in a determined grip.

But on throwing the door open she paused again, coming to a standstill on the threshold as if transfixed.

Dufferin, sure enough, was there, standing in full view and in his favourite attitude, with his back against the mantelpiece, and wearing an urbanely inscrutable expression. But it was not his aspect that had disconcerted her. Indeed, she barely favoured it with a fleeting glance, before her attention was arrested by the companion on whom he smiled so affably—on a lady whose hair was of gleaming gold and whose laugh at that moment rang out with a vaguely familiar sound, in applause of her host's latest witticism. Then her bewildered gaze drifted to the couch at the other side of the hearth, across which was draped a rich, silk-lined, fur coat ; but it

again returned almost immediately to its stupefied scrutiny of the golden head and pink-and-white profile.

Violet !

But what was Violet doing here ? What did she want ? Why had she come—*now*—when after such a lapse of time she was nothing but a memory—a not very pleasant memory ?

Nevertheless, intuitively, she realized that Violet was not here on her account.

Suddenly the golden head turned in her direction, and recognition, for an instant, flashed into Violet's blue eyes ; then with a disdainful toss it again faced round towards Dufferin.

Almost simultaneously the artist's glance also fell on the open door, and the scarcely perceptible motion of his head signalled a dismissal to the silent onlooker.

Softly closing the door behind her, Penelope retreated to her own room. Her sensations were such that she was resolved not to think, not to attempt to seek answers for any of the unaccountably perturbing questions that were obtruding themselves on her attention, not to acknowledge that something had wounded her—that something had struck her a much harder blow than any she herself had dealt during the encounter earlier in the afternoon.

What a perverse fool she was, she told herself bitterly, as with petulant, jerky movements she tore off her coat and hat and flung them on the bed. Why couldn't she be *glad* that he had so obviously forgotten that she was his wife ? For he *had* forgotten—he *must* have forgotten ! Why couldn't she welcome slights and indignities, as proofs that he had entirely forgotten ?

Yes, it was sheer perversity—sheer perversity which had made her waste emotional energy in hating him, in resenting his demeanour, in—in hating and resenting that Violet, in her absence, should be his honoured guest !

Where could he have made Violet's acquaintance ? Ah, there she was again ! What could it matter to her, and why should she care—except that an answer might gratify perverse curiosity, which assuredly didn't deserve to be humoured !

" But he knew—the minute I opened the door—that I was there, though he pretended to be too much engrossed to notice me ! " she reminded herself vindictively. " He waited deliberately to give me the chance of seeing how agreeable and polite he could be if he chose, and then dismissed me as if—as if I wasn't fit for her—for *their* company. Of course I don't mind a bit—not a single, tiny scrap, for anything he says or does or thinks or looks, but, all the same . . . '

All of a sudden she held her breath and listened.

The studio door had opened, and voices and laughter now sounded quite close and distinctly from the hall outside.

Instantly Penelope clapped her hands over her ears and continued to hold them there for exactly five minutes by the clock on the mantelpiece. Then she removed them cautiously and listened again.

No voices were audible now, no sound at all except the creaking of Harriet's shoes as her shuffling steps conveyed her, apparently, in the direction of Penelope's door : as these ceased, a peremptory knock drummed on the panels.

" Come in," Penelope answered ; and the door opened about half an inch.

"Mr. Dufferin says you're to go to the studio," Harriet announced ; adding in a lower key as the door shut and she retreated, "and to look sharp about it, too !"

For the fraction of a second Penelope demurred. But her preference for immediate action, her instinct to go straight to meet what lay in store for her, finally defeated her weaker inclination to remain where she was and ignore his command. Dufferin, she contended, might possibly—indeed, *would*, quite probably—construe her non-attendance into an admission that he could wound her ; so, at any cost, she must speedily disabuse his mind of such a preposterous notion.

"Harriet says you want me," she said, entering the studio only a moment after the delivery of his message.

Dufferin was still standing where she had last seen him, but now with his elbow on the chimney-piece, and his eyes fixed meditatively upon the fire ; when she spoke, however, he turned his head quickly and with a transparent pretence at astonishment seemed about to disclaim all responsibility in Harriet's assertion, then reconsidered his intention and checked himself in time.

"I thought you might like to get warm," he explained with unmistakable symptoms of sheepiness, giving a prod with his foot to the chair lately vacated by Violet, as an indication that she was now to occupy it.

Deliberately ignoring this ungracious hint, Penelope seated herself in the corner of the couch that was the farthest from him.

Giving no sign of having noticed this, the artist drew forward the rejected chair until its legs touched the fender, sat down on its extreme edge with his feet

in the grate, and became deeply absorbed in tracing rings among the ashes, using the poker as a pencil.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" he at length inquired, breaking a silence that had hitherto been disturbed by no sound save the scraping of his iron tool upon the tiles.

"Very much, thank you," Penelope answered coldly.

"You didn't stay out very long."

"No—not very."

There had been a time, and not so very long ago, Penelope meditated, as she waited for the next question, when the artist's lack of curiosity in her affairs had been a source of vexation to her; but now that some whim impelled him to seek information she was unreasonably, inconsistently, loath to impart it. Another instance of her perversity!

"Marsham didn't come back with you?"

"No."

A pause.

"How did he entertain you?"

"Oh—we talked."

"Do you like being talked to?"

Penelope indulged in an irritated wriggle, and wished she had the daring to snatch the poker from his hand and dash it to the opposite end of the room.

"That depends," she answered, with an effort controlling her feelings. "But one thing I certainly *don't* like is people who try to *make* conversation by catechizing one."

With a vicious sweep of the iron pencil the ashes were suddenly scattered in all directions, causing instant destruction to a row of neatly arranged and symmetrical circles.

"In short, you'd be thankful if I shut up?"

Dufferin growled, now busying himself in poking the fire with such zeal that almost immediately a smell of scorching cloth proceeded from his trousers.

"Oh, no—not at all," Penelope assured him amiably. "For you see, there's really not so much more you can ask—in fact, only where we went, what we saw, and how we got back—I think those must be the lot. Oh, but I'm wrong, for there's another trifle I nearly forgot! As I hadn't any money, and there were a couple of small things I needed badly, I was obliged to be indebted for the amount to Mr. Marsham. He didn't seem to think it necessary that I should tell you, but as you're so anxious for a full account of everything, that may as well be included."

Instead of retaliating with some scathing retort, Dufferin, to her amazement—and disappointment—appeared only contrite and concerned.

"I'm sorry," he muttered apologetically. "You should have let me know that you wanted to do shopping before you went out."

"To tell the truth, I didn't care to add to your worries, when you already seemed so upset at my going out at all," she returned, determined to show no mercy, and assuming an air of condescending consideration of a quality exactly suited as a goad for his temper.

Eyeing him stealthily, she waited a moment ; then, perceiving that her first efforts were unlikely to produce the desired results, she made haste to supplement them.

"Besides, I couldn't conscientiously ask you for money, you know," she resumed. "For having only been in your employment about ten days I've not

yet earned what'll repay the sum you advanced to settle my debt to Mrs. Robins."

At last, there could be no doubt as to her success. But, as always, repentance followed revenge too swiftly, turning her bitterness against her own impetuosity.

For he did not retort angrily or provocatively, lashing at her with the virulence of his displeasure; instead, it was as if he were administering a warning rap on her knuckles.

"Since then, if you can remember, I endowed you with my worldly goods, Mrs. Dufferin," he said, without glancing in her direction, his hands alone betraying, by the nervous energy with which they manipulated the poker, that any emotion underlay his speech.

Penelope felt herself colour up to the roots of her hair; and even had an appropriate response presented itself to her, the unaccountable lump which rose in her throat must have strangled its utterance.

Her silence must have surprised him, for he presently turned his head and subjected her to a lengthy and comprehensive scrutiny.

"And I prefer that Mrs. Dufferin should apply to me direct for all she requires, instead of borrowing from outsiders and afterwards informing me of the debt. Naturally she needs the wherewithal to replenish her wardrobe, if she wishes to do credit to her escort on expeditions such as she has enjoyed this afternoon."

Biting her lip to control its quivering, and hoping earnestly that her discomfiture was not apparent, Penelope maintained silence.

"What about a fur coat like Lady Vendeston's?"

he went on and now there was unmistakable mockery blended with his affectation of concerned interest. "And diamond earrings? Probably you noticed those she had on to-day. Well, I promise you that, when I'm paid for the portrait she's ordered, I'll do my best to supply you with the same."

Despite his tone, Penelope experienced a grateful sense of relief. For had he not explained Violet's presence at the studio—explained it altogether satisfactorily? Then, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, indignation revived. What business had he to tell her this! What business had he to rouse in her feelings she could not account for, feelings to which she would not admit she had a right!

"Don't!" she cried out sharply, the sound escaping her lips involuntarily.

"Don't what?" With a feigned air of mystification he lifted his brows. "Surely you've no objection to fur coats and diamonds earrings, or—but that is scarcely conceivable—to Lady Vendeston herself?"

"Don't talk like that. You know that I hate as much as you do to think of myself as anything but your model."

Instantly all trace of his frivolous demeanour disappeared.

"How much is that?" he asked, in a voice that sounded oddly constrained and cold.

"And you know as well as I do how you want to forget the—the ruinous blunder you made."

"Ruinous blunder? Please explain."

"Oh, it was, and is, a ruinous blunder; and you've found that out already—you can't deny it!" she hurried on breathlessly. "The far-fetched notion that my face could inspire you—oh, it's too absurd,

too humiliating, too horrid, and I can't—I can't explain ! ”

Springing up, she stood confronting him for an instant, then stamped her foot petulantly, as if hoping thereby to convince him that it was anger and not misery which had throttled her articulation.

“ Really, this is most interesting and instructive. But do try to control yourself that you may add a little more—just a hint about my blunder, and why it has been ruinous, and to whom ? ”

“ I won't,” she muttered stubbornly.

“ You needn't go,” he said, as she made a movement suggestive of contemplated flight. “ For I'm about to relieve you of my society, as I've no doubt you'll be glad to hear.”

He got up also as he spoke, advancing a few steps so that he now stood between her and the door ; then he turned and faced her sternly.

“ One last word,” he said. “ You will kindly bear in mind that I *forbid* you to borrow money from Mr. Marsham again.”

A shrug of the shoulders concluded this injunction, as he turned away.

For a moment Penelope stared at him with a queer, wild look, then uttered a shrill little laugh which sounded much more hysterical than defiant.

“ Oh, there's no need,” she returned, in a voice of the same quality. “ He's not my only stand-by, by any means. I've a friend, if you'd like to know, who's offered to help me 'at any time and in any way.' Only last Sunday he promised that—but, oh, what ages ago it seems ! ”

Whether he heard or not she could not ascertain,

for the slamming of the studio door was his sole response.

Silence after that seemed to resound with a hollow echo, as if mocking and querying her empty boast. And while she listened, Penelope realized that she was lonely—unaccountably, unutterably, miserably lonely.

Yet, for many minutes after he had gone, only one closed door separated her from the artist. On the other side of it, in the gloom of the unlighted hall, Dufferin was standing, his eyes straining to pierce an obscurity far more impenetrable than that which met his bodily vision, the baffling obscurity of time-dimmed memory.

"A friend?" he muttered.

But as a picture of long ago rose before his mental vision, Penelope's figure alone stood out clearly.

Was that a friend—that vague shadow of a light-coloured waistcoat and straw hat?

Memory, however, declined to supply even the most fleeting glimpse of a face that had failed to attract interest or observation all those years ago.

CHAPTER XX

NEXT morning breakfast was unusually late at the studio, a sure signal that Dufferin's mood was not in tune with his work.

"I've an appointment at ten," he announced, springing up the instant he had despatched a hurried meal. "Don't know when I'll be in; but Lady Vendeston said she was coming this morning, so if I'm late she'll have to wait, as she forgot to mention any special hour."

These remarks were apparently addressed to nobody in particular, but as Penelope paid no heed to them Marsham felt obliged to assume the responsibility of answering.

"I'll see to it if I'm here; if not——"

But before he had time to name the alternative, Dufferin was gone.

"Well, I sincerely hope he'll be in the same hurry to get back as he seems to be about rushing off," Marsham observed, as he rose from the table to fetch his pipe.

While he was lighting it, Penelope watched him with an almost agonized look, and the same look followed him when he strolled over to the window and stood gazing abstractedly out upon the stretch of roofs and chimney-pots beyond.

"*Must* you go out, too?"

With an expression of surprise he turned round quickly.

"I'm afraid I have to. Why?"

"Because—because then I may have to meet Vi—Lady——"

"Lady Vendeston? But why should that frighten you? She's not the least formidable—only grand as far as fine feathers make fine birds. She was a chorus girl, you know, before poor little Vendeston made such an ass of himself."

"Oh, I know!" Penelope made an impatiently despairing gesture. "It's because I know that I mind. I lived with her for the first week I spent in London—the week before she got married—and I've no more wish to meet her again than she has to meet me."

It was the first information of her previous circumstances she had ever volunteered to anybody except Bertie Lembridge, and now it appeared to amaze her quite as much as it did its recipient; for no sooner had she uttered it than an alarmed expression overspread her face.

"And how in the world did you come across her?" Marsham demanded curiously.

"She was my cousin. My people in the country sent me to her, as at first there seemed nowhere else for me to go."

"I see. But then, as you know her already, and are related, I should conclude you were the very person to keep her here until Dufferin sees fit to come back?"

His obtuseness was beginning to irritate her, appearing to her inconceivably selfish.

"But can't you understand?" she cried. "Don't you understand that I *can't want* to meet her here, and that she won't want to meet me?"

Marsham's look should have revealed to her that

he understood perfectly, but his verbal reply was not sufficiently in keeping with it to promote the faintest hope.

"Nevertheless, one sometimes has to look at two sides of a question, you know," he said gently. "So, on Dufferin's account, I'm going to ask you to sacrifice your own feelings and those of Lady Vendeston in this matter, by receiving her and keeping her here if she arrives before him. It may mean a good deal to him if he contrives to make a good portrait of her, and he can't afford to let opportunities slip—though, unfortunately, it's not easy to make him realize that. What's most likely to happen is that he'll forget the appointment, and not remember it again until after he'd kept her waiting a considerable time; in which case, she might go off in a huff before he gets here. I couldn't force her to stay, neither could Harriet, despite her jailor-like grimness, but it's quite possible that you might be able to. Do you see? It's an extra sacrifice of your already sorely afflicted feelings, I know, but this time it's offered in a real cause—not for what he believes to be his ambition, but for the sake of an advertisement of the work he can really do, for the sake of his career. Now, I wonder which you'll feel to be the most worth while—to sacrifice Lady Vendeston's feelings to Dufferin's chances of success, or to sacrifice his chances to her feelings?"

While he was speaking he had watched her intently, noting with the keenest interest those swift changes of expression which betrayed an inward conflict, the impetuous parting of her lips, as if dismay had first startled her into a protesting outcry, then the resolute tightly compressed lines in which they were immediately controlled.

But he had no means of guessing the accusation of coercion she brought against him, that she was silently denouncing him for compelling her consent, for leaving her no choice, for ruthlessly pointing out to her the one method by which the reparation she owed might be made, the one which, no matter how repugnant, she might not shrink from making.

"I suppose I must, if you put it in that way," she muttered, almost sullenly.

Scarcely had this ungracious assent been secured than a resounding knock hammered on the outer door, and a peremptory summons from the electric bell started Harriet's shuffling steps along the passage.

"I'm off!" Marsham whispered, as he slipped between the swing-doors and disappeared.

When Harriet presently flung open the door, announcing in unctious accents—"Lady Vendeston," Penelope was standing with her back to the light: and not until the housekeeper's creaking steps had once more retreated to the kitchen did she look round.

"I'm sorry Mr. Dufferin had to go out, but he'll not be very long, I know," she said. "I hope you don't mind waiting a little."

Violet who, since entering, had been regarding her with undisguised suspicion, now started back with an exclamation of disgust and alarm.

"You!" she gasped.

"Yes—me," Penelope answered; and she even contrived to smile. "Surely a poor relation isn't such an appalling monster, and deserves a better greeting than that?"

But it was obvious that Violet did not agree, for she whisked round towards the door, evidently

intending instant flight. Already she had grasped the handle when Penelope interposed.

"Don't be alarmed. This one hasn't the least intention of molesting you, or even claiming relationship." Whilst tendering this assurance she had followed Violet, and now placed her hand on hers, gently removing it from the knob.

Violet flashed another suspicious look at her, then, as she submitted, her expression changed to helpless, peevish bewilderment; finally all her strength of purpose seemed to melt away as she intuitively recognized a stronger will and the hopelessness of opposing it.

"If I'd known you were here I'd not have come," she muttered sulkily.

"You saw me last night," Penelope reminded her.

"I know I did, but that didn't mean you'd be here to-day," Violet retorted, resigning herself, however, to the inevitable, and seeking out the most comfortable chair, into which she sank with an air of utter exhaustion. "What are you doing here?—Pretending to be his secretary, I suppose."

"No: his model."

"What?"

"I'm his model," Penelope repeated.

Nevertheless, she reflected bitterly, Violet's manner of referring to her rôle was the most accurate description—far more truthfully might she say—'*pretending to be his model!*'

"So you've sunk to that? I thought you intended to be a secretary when you'd finished at the typing place?"

"Does it interest or concern you what I've sunk to? When you left me with Ada Duval long ago, you didn't trouble much about what became of me."

Violet shuddered.

"For pity's sake, don't mention those dreadful times, and don't be so odiously ungenerous as to rake up petty grievances that can't matter a scrap now. Really, Penelope, I don't blame you a bit, and now I come to think of it you've done much better for yourself than I ever expected you would," she concluded, with a little significant titter, the sound of which brought the blood rushing to her listener's cheeks.

"Funny I should run across you when Ada never has," Violet resumed musingly, after waiting in vain for any acknowledgement of her approbation.

"Since I left Eglantine Villas the morning after you did, I've never seen or heard anything of Ada. Have you?"

Again Violet shuddered, this time uttering an agonized sound, half sigh, half groan.

"Oh, haven't I? Haven't I been persecuted by her until sometimes I feel I'd give anything I've gained to get back the peace I used to have. Every time she finds herself hard up she blackmails me, my dear—threatens to attach herself to me and claim me as an old pal, unless I give her what she wants. You've behaved better than that certainly."

"Decidedly," Penelope concurred, but without any sign of elation at this tribute to her forbearance.

"And for God's sake, don't start the same game now, will you?" Violet entreated in sudden alarm.

"Simply for my own sake, I can promise that without hesitation."

Violet drew another deep sigh.

"But don't, please, remind me of Ada any more," she begged pathetically. "As I've been lured into

meeting you, on false pretences, let's hear something about your adventures now. What puzzles me most is why, if you want to be disreputable, you hit on a creature like George Dufferin to help you to it. All the same, now I come to think of it, you were starting off to have tea with someone you'd picked up in the park—a promising beginning, and bound to end this way, I suppose."

The disparaging tone in which the artist's name was pronounced kindled Penelope's resentment with an unexpectedness that even amazed herself, making her entirely overlook the vilification of her own; obliterating, moreover, all sense of grievance against his caprices and the preposterous position in which they had placed her, against his subsequent attitude towards her and their relationship, which was the cause of the present misconstruction of her presence here.

"If you've such a low opinion of him, why do you want him to paint your portrait?" she demanded hotly.

Violet laughed and tossed her head.

"Because I heard him talked about and got interested, and thought it might be fun," she returned. "Someone said he'd remarkable talent, and might make a reputation as a portrait-painter if he'd the chance of getting known. So it struck me I'd like the feeling of bringing him into notice, and trotting him out as a *protégé* of my own."

"I see. Well, I'm sure he's fortunate in having such a benefactress." There was a perfectly unconscious touch of irony in Penelope's tone.

"But you must promise not to brag to him that you're Lady Vendeston's cousin—now, won't you?" Violet entreated with a recurrence of her former

agitation. "Whatever you do, don't let it leak out that we're connexions."

"I'll think about the promise—after you've undertaken to be a little more discreet in your comments and speculations on my affairs," Penelope returned dryly.

"Oh Lord! how thin-skinned you are—or pretend to be!" Violet lamented. "You've changed a lot, I must say. If I'd to live with you now I might be thankful for that, but as I haven't—well, what matter, for I must be going now. I really can't waste the whole morning waiting for painters who seem to be as ill-mannered as they're obscure."

"Oh yes, I think you can," Penelope disagreed confidently.

But Violet was too much engrossed in arranging her furs and gathering together her various belongings preparatory to departure, to note the significance of the tone.

"I've a white satin frock under this coat," she explained querulously, "and I've got to change to go out to lunch when I get home. I wonder if he's any use at painting satin and pearls, though really it doesn't matter, for I believe I'd be far wiser to get someone better known and who knows better how to treat his patrons."

"But the next man mightn't need your patronage," Penelope reminded her diplomatically. "His name would be already made, so you'd miss the honour and glory of helping him to make it."

Violet was, however, much too incensed to be won by this suggestion. With an air of weighty resolution she rose to her feet

"I can't help that. Someone else is quite welcome

to the honour and glory, if there's anyone who's such a fool as to stand the man's rudeness. Good-bye, and for Heaven's sake, don't breathe a word about me being your cousin."

Penelope got up also ; as she did so a strained look came into her face, and there was a movement in her throat as if she were trying to swallow something that had stuck there, something, moreover, which appeared to have a very bitter taste.

"If you wait here till Mr. Dufferin comes in, and allow him to paint your portrait as you first intended, then I'll promise 'not to breathe a word ;' but——" she paused, her attention distracted by some distant sound. "After all, he's not kept you waiting so very long, for I can hear him coming now," she ended with a little laugh.

Violet flopped back into her chair.

"I promise—yes, I promise faithfully, only—oh, go—go—go !" she implored in an agitated undertone. "For the love of mercy, don't let him think I've been talking to *you* !"

In one bound Penelope reached the swing-doors, and without another word or backward look disappeared into the adjoining room.

CHAPTER XXI

ALTHOUGH Violet and her white satin gown paid three more visits to the studio, in connexion with the picture that was to advertise George Dufferin's genius, she did not again encounter the artist's model. For on each occasion Penelope had taken the precaution of ascertaining the hour of her arrival and had then contrived to be absent, Philip Marsham proving not only willing to help her in this, but having, moreover, readily consented to keep his knowledge of the relationship a strict secret.

Accordingly it was not at the studio—though the day was one on which Violet was expected to pose for the final sitting—that they again met. This time Penelope and Marsham, after a long morning during which he had patiently accompanied her on a round of shop window-gazing, were finishing a lunch at Prince's before returning to Chelsea immediately; and probably, had Violet been more discreet in subduing her high-pitched voice, neither she nor her cousin would have become conscious of one another's proximity.

But above the noise of the music a laugh rang out suddenly, and though Marsham, even if the sound reached him, had no occasion to associate it with anyone in particular, to Penelope's ears its penetrating quality seemed to break through and silence all others, seemed distinct from all others and to blare forth, "I am Violet, so what business have *you* to be here?"

Presently she ventured to cast a stealthy glance sideways, in the direction whence it came, and with the tail of her eye caught a glimpse of dazzling pink and white and gleaming gold. So far, she felt assured, Violet had not noticed her, for she appeared completely absorbed in the conversation of the woman who was her companion.

This was the opportunity to slip away unobserved. So Penelope leaned forward that she might attract her host's notice and propose an immediate return to the studio, in her anxiety half rising from the table as she did so. But her request was undelivered; instead, without uttering a sound, she sank back to her seat, her attitude suddenly transformed with one of rigid observation, a look of strained, expectant, yet apprehensive intentness overspreading her face.

Glancing up in surprise to ascertain the reason of her strange behaviour Marsham instantly perceived that something must be amiss; then he also recognized Lady Vendeston, and his attention was arrested and gripped, with the same petrifying effect, by the strident tones of her companion's speech.

"But, oh, do tell me more about George Dufferin?" the other woman was pleading shrilly. "I *do* so want to hear something really first-hand about the scandal, and you *must* know something after being so sporting as to venture into his dreadful little studio. Do tell me if you've seen the fascinating beggar that he's said to have picked out of the gutter at midnight and kept hidden away in his den ever since? Is she his model or is she——? Well, he's extremely foolish, and still, in a way, it's romantic, and one can't really say whether it'll stop people going there, or simply make them invade him out of pure curiosity. *Have* you

seen the creature, or is she kept out of the way of the public gaze ? ”

This time, however, Violet's friend had apparently failed to amuse her, for the ringing laugh was silent.

“ What *you* are telling *me* is the very first I've heard of anything of the kind,” she answered stiffly. “ And you may be perfectly certain I'd not go near the place again if I'd found I'd have to meet people like that.”

“ But what a pity ! ” the other lamented. “ Well, possibly she was only a temporary mania—that is, if she wasn't a myth—and not, as I've heard hinted, an infatuation which might end in his feeling obliged to marry her, and so, probably, ruin his prospects of ever becoming the rage as a fashionable portrait-painter.”

“ If he was mad enough to do that, it's to be hoped she'd have the consideration to realize the harm she was doing him, and so to tumble down those awful stairs and break her neck,” Violet returned irritably, “ —unless there was the chance of her speedy demise by more natural means, or of her giving him a good pretext for a divorce ; for he'd be looking out for some way of getting rid of her in no time, and it would be pleasanter for him if she'd help in procuring it.”

This time the laugh rang out as a conclusion to the last remark, an ugly, heartless, soulless little laugh ; and then, as if some magnetic influence compelled her gaze, she glanced sideways and for an instant encountered the fascinated, startled look of horror in Penelope's eyes. Only for a second, however, did astonishment betray her into allowing recognition to be revealed in hers, and only for the smallest fraction of that second did she quail, as if realizing subconsciously the disastrous folly her words might have instigated. But the pause was scarcely perceptible to an ordinary on-

looker, and the next instant she was raising a wine-glass to lips from which careless mirth again rang out, while Penelope still watched, still struggled to grasp the full meaning of the message her speech had imparted.

" Shall we go ? "

As Marsham asked the question she started nervously, and the look she cast at him revealed her scarcely controlled terror.

" Yes," she answered, her tone sounding on a dead note.

Once more her predominant desire was to escape—to escape from almost everything, in any way that was possible ; to escape from one thing in particular—if only she could first reconcile her fears to the one means by which escape could be satisfactorily accomplished.

" Which would you sooner do—walk or have a taxi ? " Marsham asked as they reached the entrance.

" Walk, I think."

Not once on the homeward way did she address her companion, nor did he attempt to induce her to speak. Intuitively, he had divined, to some extent at least, the reasons for her preoccupation, and had realized that no reassurance from him, however tactfully offered, could avail to comfort her. All that was left for him to do was inwardly to curse Violet for the unwholesome thoughts which her unwholesome remarks must have engendered ; to curse Dufferin for having created a situation which must inevitably expose a helpless girl to unmerited obliquity ; furthermore, to curse himself for having induced her to meet Violet at the studio, Violet for having decided that Dufferin and no other should paint her portrait, and

the artist for being obliged to depend on patronage such as hers.

Occasionally he glanced at Penelope, but each time only to become more puzzled by the inscrutable serenity of her expression. For her face revealed neither anger, unhappiness, nor shame ; except for her silence, there was nothing that could indicate an unusual state of mind.

But it would have amazed him still more had he been able to make the discovery that her appearance was actually a reflexion of her latest mental condition. For, after the first shock of recognition of the only course of action left open to her by her present predicament, she had succeeded in deliberately forcing the greater part of her mind to become blank. Luckily for herself, introspection had never appealed to her, and life had taught her how disastrous anticipation can prove to those whose sole stand-by is stoutness of heart. Almost instinctively, therefore, she had pushed the hideous thing out of sight, locked it away to await the inevitable moment when she must be forced to meet it face to face ; for the time being, striven to forget it. Consequently, until some distraction furnished her with a fresh stock of ideas, she had perforce to keep silent, for a blank mind affords nothing that can usefully contribute to conversation.

Nor for many days after that silent walk did she find it possible to fill up the blankness, find any subjects she could safely talk about or dared to contemplate. So, during the frequent hours of idleness to which she was then condemned, she continued to concentrate the greater part of her mental energies on an avoidance of self-analysis and introspection.

Nevertheless, she could not entirely ignore the

existence of some new, disturbing element at the back of her mind, or that one's own sensations make disquietingly importunate demands for recognition and investigation. For the first time, she began dimly to realize that prompt action had grown repugnant to her, that she had acquired a preference for remaining supine and awaiting developments, preferring, if possible, to encourage a condition of mental inertia rather than to exercise a brain whose energy might be utilized in anticipating tragedies from which there was no means of escape.

So the weeks drifted by, the days gradually lengthened, the trees in the parks became clothed with tender green, but Penelope's life seemed to have been forced to stand still, as if paralysed by some instinctive dread.

All this time, Dufferin, in a very desultory fashion, worked on at Violet's portrait, after having neglected it for weeks because some new whim impelled him elsewhere, often obliging him to quit the studio early and remain out till midnight. Three sittings was all he apparently required from Violet, but, when subsequently engaged on the picture, Penelope was always expected to be in attendance while he worked.

Sometimes she wondered whether Dufferin merely simulated a need for her presence so as to delude her into the belief that she was still of service to him. If that were not so, what other reason could he have? As a model, she knew, he had ceased to require her, and the notion that she assisted in promoting inspiration was too ridiculous to be entertained for a single moment; for the masterpiece of his dreams, she shrewdly suspected, lay buried in the débris of the palace of illusions that had once been its birthplace,

and was now its sepulchre. Latterly he never so much as looked towards her, her face appearing to attract and inspire as little as the one upon whose likeness he was employed.

Often, as she sat with her back to him, listening to the soft, swishing sound of his brush, she was induced to believe that he had ceased even to be cognizant of the existence of the face which had once excited him so intensely, much as he had formerly appeared oblivious of her possession of a body and mind and an individuality; that he regarded her now merely as a burden on his conscience, which, from a sense of duty, he must treat with a certain amount of humanity.

"I'm inclined to think Dufferin's wasting his time and risking his opportunities more than ever," Marsham remarked one morning, when the artist, after making the announcement that he would not be back till late at night, had hurriedly left the studio.

"That's because I'm here," was Penelope's unspoken lament. "Except by going out and neglecting his work, he can't get rid of me."

"I wonder how far he's got on," Marsham continued, "and if he'd consider it an unpardonable crime if we looked at what he has done."

Without waiting for an opinion on this point, he laid hands on the canvas, which had been consigned to a corner with its face to the wall like a naughty child, and turned it outwards.

For some minutes he studied it in silence, while Penelope, who had always felt an instinctive shrinking from gratifying her curiosity as to the work that was carried on behind her during the long, silent hours in the studio, averted her head lest she should catch even a fleeting glimpse of the picture.

"Come here," Marsham presently requested.

"Why?"

"Because I'd like you to look at this. Really it's a great deal more interesting than I'd ever ventured to hope."

"Has he managed the white satin so well, then—and the pearls?" Penelope inquired, but with an indifference that sounded decidedly artificial.

"Yes, he's certainly shown an amazing amount of sense in his attention to those; but after all, they only require skill, and he's plenty of that when he chooses to use it," Marsham replied. "It's the face I want you to look at. I want to know what you can see in it."

"I'd see—if I looked—blue eyes, pink cheeks, a cupid's bow mouth—and—am I right?—a most demure expression," Penelope said, but without glancing towards the picture.

She was angry with the portrait—unreasonably angry—so angry that she could not refrain from disparagement, not only of it but of its creator's art.

"I can see those too," Marsham returned. "But in addition I notice that the artist has performed the quite remarkable feat of bestowing a human soul upon a painted doll. Come and assure me that what I perceive isn't an optical delusion."

Very reluctantly Penelope looked round, and from where she stood surveyed the picture.

At first she only ventured to look at the lower part of it, observing the sheeny white satin which Dufferin had so dexterously and faithfully reproduced; but presently her eyes travelled upwards, resting finally on the pink and white face surmounted by an elaborate coiffeur of golden hair. Then something in

this likeness of Violet suddenly held her spell-bound—held her in a manner which, despite her beauty, the fresh and blood Violet could never have succeeded in doing.

Beyond all doubt, this picture was of Violet, was correct in every outline, in every shade of colouring; and yet there was some subtle, elusive dissimilarity, which fascinated and baffled her as she gazed.

"Funny that Dufferin should have perceived a family likeness that I, who am aware of the connexion, have absolutely failed to trace," Marsham observed. "Or is it only my fancy that adds it to the picture, do you think?"

Penelope came a few steps nearer, stooped down, and examined the painted face more closely and minutely; then turned from it hastily. For what she had seen brought a suffocating sensation to her throat, and set all the pulses in her body pounding wildly.

By some remarkable trick of his craft, by some marvellous stroke of creative ideality, achieved perhaps during one of his elusive, transcendental moments of inspiration, Dufferin, while accurately portraying Violet's body, had amalgamated with it his own conception of another personality. Although in form and features invisible, Penelope was alive at the back of the blue, painted eyes, was smiling with the carmined, cupid's bow lips, was lending to the dollish face some quality which was not naturally its own: and by her unmistakable presence, so subtly made manifest, had transformed an otherwise skilfully executed portrait in something almost amounting to a work of genius.

"It must be your fancy," Penelope said coldly,

drawing herself up and turning away, "for there's no likeness between Violet and me—either in that thing, or in real life."

Marshall's appreciative gaze was still riveted upon the wonderful achievement.

"I believe you're right," he said slowly, "and that this is the portrait of two people, conjoined in such a way as to form only one, yet keeping the two likenesses perfectly distinct. All I hope is, that he won't go and spoil the idea when he's touching the thing up. It seems really a pity to give it more finishing at all, though I don't suppose Lady Vendeston would be quite satisfied if she got it home in its present state."

"Do you think she'll be satisfied with it, then—with any of it that isn't satin dress and pearls?"

"I'm prepared to swear she will," he declared positively. "She'll be simply enchanted with it, for it's exactly how a woman of her character and aspirations would like to see herself, exactly what she'd like to think herself—a person possessed of a spirituality which is not really hers. Dufferin certainly hasn't hurried over the thing, but his dilatoriness was to some purpose on this occasion, and I'm more than half inclined to apologize to inspiration on account of what he and it have produced between them."

"I know nothing about drawing," Penelope answered indifferently, "but I think you're unjustly hard on my cousin, and further, that your fancy is every bit as absurd as the one you're so fond of ridiculing."

Marshall carefully restored the painting to its former position.

Was Dufferin, he wondered, aware of what he had done? Or was Penelope so ever-present in his

thoughts that without his knowledge she must always influence his work? Was he now even conscious that his frame of mind had revealed itself, that he had acknowledged to all who had the observation to perceive, how tremendous was the power her proximity exercised over him; or was this such an inherent obsession that, mechanically and unconsciously, he allowed it to guide him, neither questioning nor wondering at what it accomplished because the process had grown so familiar to his inner being that it had become an integral part of himself? If that were so, then Dufferin's faith in the inspiration to be obtained from a face was not entirely delusive. The pity was, however, that he appeared unable to realize fully the remarkable results of its fascination, could not sift and analyse the nature of it, and by so doing supply it with a better name. His obstinately adhesive loyalty to a first impression was undoubtedly hindering the growth of his understanding of the true nature of his sensations.

"I'd give a good deal to see him come to his senses," Marsham reflected impatiently. "But to accomplish that, it seems to me that something drastic must be done, and who's to do it . . . ?"

Meanwhile, with her back to her companion, Penelope was arriving at her own conclusions concerning Dufferin's achievement, was explaining it in another way.

"I've got so badly on his nerves that the idea of me haunts him even when he's busiest," she was telling herself despairingly.

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER Marsham left her, which he did a few minutes later, Penelope remained for some time alone, undisturbed except for her own thoughts, sitting by the window and looking out with an abstracted gaze over the sooty roofs and chimney-pots.

At half-past one the usual diversion occurred in the shape of Harriet and lunch, which the housekeeper deposited with the air of protest that always accompanied any service rendered to the unwelcome and inharmonious addition to the bachelor household. When she had departed, Penelope was permitted another lengthy spell of solitude, until the same intruder unexpectedly invaded it a second time.

"'Ere's a telegram for Mr. Dufferin," she announced, making the room quake as she traversed it to place the orange envelope in a conspicuous position on the mantelpiece. "You don't know where 'e is I suppose?" she went on grudgingly, showing plainly how she felt the outrage on her dignity caused by an admission that her master's model might have some information as to his whereabouts of which she was kept in ignorance. "This may be important, and oughter be sent on in case it needs answerin' in a 'urry."

"I've no idea where he is or when he'll be home," Penelope replied.

Some sound resembling a contemptuous grunt escaped Harriet, and for a few seconds she stood glancing uncertainly from the telegram to the model and

back again, apparently beset by suspicions as to whether it were wise to leave such a temptation in the way of one whose outfit of vices more than probably included inordinate curiosity and dishonesty. Nevertheless, she evinced no intention of safe-guarding her master's interests by removing the temptation, but presently retired, cheered by a once bitterly wholesome recollection of the risks run by those who indiscreetly meddled with George Dufferin's private affairs.

The orange envelope, however, failed to kindle the faintest spark of interest in Penelope; and its existence was entirely forgotten when, some time later, Harriet's strident voice reached her, bestowing copious information as to when it had come, where it was to be found, and the agonies of anxiety she had suffered since its arrival, to someone who must have entered the hall unheard by the solitary occupant of the studio. Then followed Dufferin's quick impatient touch on the door-handle; and she turned once more to stare fixedly out of the window.

Without appearing to notice her, he traversed the room, and the next sound that reached her now straining ears was the rustling of paper as he tore open the envelope. Then, for a few moments, there was absolute stillness.

"My father died this morning. I must start for Exeter at once."

The suddenness of his speech startled her, causing her involuntarily to turn to him.

Yet what could she say? Sympathy for his bereavement, she felt certain, he did not desire; for his way of announcing it sounded merely as a bare statement of a fact, with which he acquainted her as a reason for his hasty departure.

Nevertheless, she would have liked to say something, if only that something would enter her brain, if only her lips would convert it into words, if only she were not tongue-tied and mentally paralysed by the feeling of constraint that had latterly rendered impossible any attempt at conversation with him. And while she was vainly struggling to rid herself of it, her ideas were again shaken into yet more grievous inutility by the astounding realization that, till now, he had never referred before her to a father or to the whereabouts of his home.

"I'll look up the trains," he said presently. "Isn't there a railway-guide knocking about somewhere?"

Thankful to be able to occupy herself somehow on his behalf, Penelope hastened to help him in his search among the untidy piles of canvases, books, and papers that were heaped in every corner of the room, and finally unearthed and handed to him the dusty and battered remnants of what he required.

"I'll pack my bag now and be off," he remarked, after examining the crumpled pages for a couple of seconds, then flinging them back into a corner and striding to the door.

When, about ten minutes later, he returned, Penelope was back at her post by the window, and until, to her intense amazement, she heard his voice quite close behind her, she did not look round.

"I'm going now. Will you be all right?"

She stared at him blankly.

"You don't mind being left like this?" Although his tone suggested expectation of a negative reply, there was yet in it something that strangely resembled the faintest hint of an underlying, wistful hope.

But as if stupefied, she continued to stare at him without uttering any response.

And then, suddenly, his eyes asked another question—one which he would not allow his lips to pronounce—and he gave a little embarrassed laugh.

“Good-bye,” he said.

He half turned away, then pulled up abruptly and stretched out his right hand.

What did he mean to do with it, Penelope asked herself stupidly.

Possibly her absorption in this question was accountable for her neglect to respond to his gesture in the conventional—in the only way that was required of her, thereby compelling him to act differently from what he had first intended.

For instead of seeking the hand that hung listlessly by her side, he raised his own and for an instant laid it on her shoulder.

Penelope uttered a little gasp and shrank back, conscious now of a startling percussion that vibrated through every fibre of her being, that set all her pulses bounding, that for an instant communicated to her a strange sensation of renewed life and intense vitality.

Then the hand was withdrawn—was snatched away hastily—as if he also had experienced a shock from the contact. And before she had time to realize anything more he was gone, and with his going her spirit, now reaching the reactionary phase, seemed as still and desolate as the deserted studio.

And next she fell to investigating the cause of these unfamiliar sensations, only to discover that her recollection of them became obscured by a rapidly increasing incredulity.

Was it the intensity of her aversion which made

physical contact with him affect her so? Or had a spontaneous act of unmerited friendliness goaded her conscience to frenzy, battered her faculties into such confusion as to leave her powerless to comprehend the true nature of her perturbation? Or...

For an instant Penelope caught a glimpse of heaven's light—one of those momentary flashes, revealing that which might exist if . . .

Then her soul shrank back into the darkness.

The gates of this heaven were not open to her. He who held the key had no desire, no intention that she should enter.

Uttering a stifled moan of anguish she turned blindly towards the window, and leaning her arms upon the sill dropped her head upon them.

No, she could not be mistaken.

With her hands pressed tightly upon her eyelids she was gazing back into the past, seeing once more a man's face looming dimly beside her, while the street-lamps and the other vehicles flashed past a taxi window; again she felt the poignant agony of expiring hope, and listened to a voice that thrilled her heart even while it withheld the words she yearned to hear,

"I think I can guess what's making you sad, little girl; but I know too, even more surely, that you'll soon forget."

Was he right or wrong—this man whose face she could not recall, whose words alone had remained in her memory as a menace and a warning. Had he been a man at all? Or was he the incarnation of the fate that ruled her life?

Did one ever forget? She had believed him to be forgotten, but there he was—the man who had first drawn her attention to, first cast her under the spell

of the ardent gaze which had magnetized her until . . . Oh no, when he spoke of such easy forgetfulness he meant only the mushroom growth of youth's deluding rapture !

After all, could there be any comparison between past and present ? What she had been then, she was not now. Those three added years, so full of varied experiences, must inevitably have altered the feelings and the outlook of one who, formerly, knew nothing of life save as it appeared surrounded by the romantic glamour of dreams. Through their repeated reverses and disillusionments her recuperative powers had been weakened ; they had taught her distrust of the reluctant emotion which, unawares, she had lavished on the man who was lawfully hers, yet filled her with a terror and a heartache, such as she had never known for the nameless man of long ago or for a lost illusion.

And all this time she had been convincing herself that she was too much of a materialist for romantic emotions ever again to disquiet her—that on creature comforts alone were her desires set.

Unwittingly, had she always known ?

Looking back, could she now recall one single instant since her capture by Dufferin when some thought of him had not been uppermost in her mind : then, was that obsession the thing she feared ? How often she had persuaded herself that sympathy with his aims was alone accountable for her surrender to his will : was that a deliberate self-deception ? Later, she had resolved to take desperate measures lest even the fact of her existence might hinder him on the road to fame : and—and she had not taken them. Instead, she had schooled herself to avoid self-questioning : induced

herself to remain inactive until—something should happen. What was it that she had waited for?

Could it be . . . ?

Raising her head she gazed out, over the forest of chimney-pots and up at the darkening sky above, as if hoping that they might provide an answer.

"Legally he is my husband—he is mine," she muttered argumentatively. Then with a stifled sob, "But that makes it so much more horrible! That leaves him so powerless to shake me off—means that he must go on making ruinous sacrifices——"

Ah—sacrifices! For the sake of his art he had been willing to sacrifice everything, contending that lives such as hers and his counted so little to anybody that the best use for both was to convert them into a sacrifice to a noble ambition. But already he had done enough, and it was her turn now. If not for the sake of ambition, then for that of the thing which had lifted her within sight of the gates of Heaven, she should be ready and willing. If she really cared, then no sacrifice should be too great—her own extinction should seem a matter of no account compared with the knowledge that his career was safe and unhampered.

At last she was face to face with the horror she had so long shrunk from anticipating—she was confronted at close quarters by the hideous fate prescribed for her by Violet. But now it was so near she must not shirk it—must not, rather, seek to shirk it, but recognize at once that such an attempt was doomed to failure when opposed by such an inexorable Nemesis as that which ordered her destiny.

For one brief moment her spirit was exalted above all earthly considerations, uplifted by the magnitude of her self-abnegation; and it was well for the peace of

George Dufferin's artistic soul that he was far away when the fading light revealed her transfigured face, showing it as if it were illumined from within by the divine fire of an altruistic purpose.

"Hullo! are you all alone in the dark? Then the inspired one hasn't put in an appearance yet?"

With a stunning sense of shock Penelope was hurled back to the commonplaces of everyday life. Whilst her spirit had been soaring towards realms sublime, completely detaching her perceptions from mundane matters, Marsham must have entered the studio unobserved, and it was his cheery matter-of-fact greeting which had struck her down to earth once more.

"No—yes," she stammered stupidly, while he switched on the light, then turned to her smiling.

"Have you been asleep? You look half dazed."

"The light dazzled me—that's all," she muttered.

"Shall we order tea? I suppose it's no use depending on our friend's getting an inspiration to come home and join us?"

"No. We may as well," she answered listlessly; then realizing Marsham's misapprehension and recollecting that it was her business to enlighten him, "Mr. Dufferin's gone to Exeter. A wire came to say his father was dead."

"That's sudden. I suppose he was pretty cut up."

On this point Penelope had no information to give.

"When did he go?"

"I don't know. A long time ago, I think."

"Leave any message?"

"No."

Drawing a chair close to the fire, Marsham sat down.

"Didn't say when he might be back?"

"No."

He wheeled round on her suddenly with a look of mingled amusement and exasperation.

"I've no doubt I'm most annoyingly inquisitive, but all the same I'd be most grateful if you could see your way to becoming just a trifle more communicative?"

Penelope stared at him blankly.

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what arrangements, if any, he made about you," came the prompt reply.

"About me?"

"Yes; about you," Marsham repeated. "You must be aware that you and I can't very well share this flat while he's away. If he's said nothing about that, the best thing I can do is to leave you in possession, and to put up at my club while he's away."

"Why? What difference can it make—his being away?"

For a second Marsham stared steadily at her, and in that second she knew that Dufferin had imparted the secret of his sacrifice to art to at least one of his friends.

"Shall I ring for tea?" he asked abruptly, as he withdrew his gaze.

"If you like," she answered faintly. "But I don't want any. I'm not feeling well, I think."

At once he was on his feet, full of concern and dismay.

"Shall I ring up a doctor?" was however the only one of his offers and suggestions which caught her attention without harassing her wits.

"Not now. Perhaps to-morrow I'd like to see one but—but——" she faltered, avoiding his eyes as she

realized that her own were probably too expressive not to proclaim that she was deceiving him.

"But what? Tell me."

Penelope made a little choking sound as she gulped up the lie which was sticking in her throat and very nearly suffocating her.

"I've no money to pay one," she brought out in a sort of small explosion.

"Oh, is that all?" Masham smiled, misinterpreting her very obvious trepidation. "Well, you've only got to tell me how much you want, and it's yours. You needn't hesitate, for the matter can be settled with Dufferin when he gets back."

But meanwhile Penelope was asking herself in horror and bewilderment,

"Why did I do that? What made me think of such an unnecessarily abominable thing to do? To give me the means to mark time supposing I get funky, of course! Oh, you coward—you mean coward—did you think you'd manage even to cheat yourself? But I'm watching you, so——"

Consequently Penelope quite overlooked the necessity of thanking him, so astounded and appalled was she by the revelation that it was not always her weaker self that was a coward, not always and only the inferior half of her moral self that suggested procrastination—that stole a march on the unsuspecting other, and compelled it to become an accomplice in despicable undertakings. Both were equally accountable, equally treacherous; the conscious was in no way superior to the subconscious.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR the first three days after Dufferin's departure, Penelope found excuse for her inactivity by arguing that as yet action would be too soon, that until warning of his return was received she had better wait.

That warning, she had decided, would come in the form of a telegram, and then . . .

After those three days had dragged by—their monotony only varied by several visits from Marsham and the occasional walk on which he persuaded her to accompany him—four more succeeded them in much the same fashion, except that on every occasion that the door-bell rang, or that Harriet invaded the studio or the adjoining room in which most of Penelope's time was spent during the artist's absence, her heart went pit-a-pat at the thought that at last the telegram was to be placed in her hands and her fate to be irrevocably sealed—the fate prescribed for her by Violet's thoughtless speech, the one from which she shrank like a coward, praying for a reprieve, yet the only one which could be hers if George Dufferin were to be set free.

"It's all I can do," she told herself over and over again. "For the other thing she spoke of is quite out of the question—even if I wanted to do it I wouldn't know how; besides it's more natural, somehow, to kill one's body and keep one's soul alive than to manage the other way about."

At this time, Bertie Lembridge shared with the artist

most of her thoughts, and appeared to have assumed in them a place of importance to which it had never hitherto been his good fortune to be promoted. She ought to communicate with Bertie, perhaps, she reflected—yes, she really should ; for Bertie had been a kind, good friend, so it was only fair that he should know what had become of her. Lately she had not treated him fairly, she had forgotten him, in fact, in a manner that a kind friend should never be forgotten. Yes, she should write to Bertie—but not quite yet.

Why was she delaying ? What was it that she had not even the honesty to acknowledge to herself ? Then there was that money too—borrowed on false pretences from Philip Marsham ! Why had she borrowed it ? And what was her real motive for wanting to write to Bertie ?

“ I’m always at your service if you want me, at any time or in any way.”

Her subconscious self had remembered that promise, now often whispering it to her, and it roused strange feelings within her as she listened—a hope and faith that were strangely stimulating—and it seemed to endow Bertie with the powers of a demi-god. But then, if she relied so implicitly on those superhuman, omnipotent powers, why had she borrowed money from a mere mortal like Marsham ? Besides, of what use would money be to her when . . .

But she was over-rating not only Bertie’s powers but his magnanimity, the conscious self taunted. If money were useless in such a case, so were friends who promised unlimited help. These were only for people who resolved to live, to make the very most and best they can of life. Yet while life lasts there is always hope ;

without it how could there be desires, or temptations to await developments?

Yet she scarcely knew whether relief or an insupportable agony of suspense was her predominating sensation, when by the close of the seventh day no message had come; although, in the morning, when she had assured herself that a few hours would surely end the period of waiting, her heart had seemed to shrivel up and turn cold and wobbly.

But the message did not come: instead, as the dusk of a wet, stormy evening was gathering, Dufferin himself appeared on the threshold of the room in which she kept vigil.

On recognizing him, she started to her feet, uttering a half suppressed exclamation of dismay.

Not unnaturally, he misinterpreted the sound, together with her air of consternation and confusion, and his face which, at the first moment when his eyes fell on her, had been alight with eagerness, now perceptibly darkened and hardened.

With the recollection of their parting still vividly fresh in his memory, her greeting had come upon him as a mortifying anti-climax to the faith and high hopes that had hastened his return.

That, in her petrified horror at the revelation thrust upon her it had not occurred to her to seek a motive for his latest change of humour, was an explanation which his optimistic mind was scarcely likely to conceive.

"So you're sorry I've come back?" he said; and, instead of advancing to greet her, he crossed over to the hearth-rug and commenced examining the accumulation of correspondence displayed on the chimney-piece.

"Why should I be?" she muttered, experiencing an unreasonable disappointment, though more at her own conduct than at his, longing to say something better qualified to earn goodwill, yet unable to check the insensate churlishness which rebelliously broke from her lips.

"Oh, because you may feel less at liberty now I'm here," he answered with studied carelessness, apparently bestowing less than half his attention on her as he tore open the envelope of one of his letters.

"Liberty!" she repeated scornfully, resentment against his attitude suddenly surging up in her, and for the moment transforming him once more into a hated tyrant. "Liberty in this place! Surely a prisoner remains a prisoner as long as she's in prison, no matter whether the chief jailor leaves the place or not."

With rather unnecessary energy Dufferin crumpled up the letter he was reading and tossed it into the fire.

While he watched it burn there was a silence, which was not broken until the last fragment had consumed away; and when at length he spoke his eyes were still riveted with an air of lachrymose absorption on the remnants of grey ashes, as if in them he recognized something symbolic of the fate of his too sanguine hopes.

"The prison door is open," he said, in a voice on which he had evidently imposed severe control. "And the last thing your jailor desires is to keep you here against your will."

What was he saying?—Was this, at last, the declaration of his desire to be rid of her—the desire predicted

by Violet ? At first Penelope stared at him in stupefaction ; then, as a full comprehension of his words broke upon her, a fury of resentment and denunciation blazed up into her eyes.

What was he telling her ? That to him belonged the right to dismiss her when he pleased, and that it was now his pleasure that she should go !

So he had no more use for her ! Though he must know that her life was spoilt by him, he was quite indifferent as to whether it were irremediably spoilt, quite callous as to what became of it now that he no longer required anything of it ! Moreover, he was robbing her of the compensating glory of self-sacrifice—manifesting his unworthiness of the last she could ever make. Because she had believed he would suffer the ruin of all his fortunes rather than cast her off, she had considered it a privilege to release him. But he had no such scruples ; he was not altruistic even to the extent of keeping her on sufferance ; he was ruthlessly, unthinkably selfish . . .

She uttered a harsh little laugh, the ugliness of which made him glance up at her in surprise.

" Thank you," she said, in a tone as amazingly uncharacteristic as the laugh. " But as it happens you're only anticipating a suggestion of mine—one I was going to make."

" Yes ? "

He was watching her steadily, with an oddly dazed, stricken look.

" I was going away. Indeed, I intended to go before you got back—but it's all the same, except that—that this might have been spared . . . "

" Yes ? "

As his voice faltered and broke something had flickered across his face—the faintest shadow of the hope which had sounded a hesitating note in his monosyllabic query.

"But I will not call it regaining my liberty," she went on, recovering herself sufficiently to proceed in the same hard, defiant tone. "That's lost for always. You robbed me of it in a way that makes it impossible ever to get it back as before. Did you think of that when—when you insisted on making the ruinous blunder?"

"No. I believe I was infatuated beyond considering anything but my own desires," he confessed with an unfamiliar humility.

"Infatuated? I thought you were *inspired*."

It was such a superfluous taunt, but Penelope was not in a frame of mind to admit of the perception that she was kicking an already vanished foe. Dufferin, however, revealed his opinion of it by a patiently hopeless shrug of his shoulders.

"Well, there's no object in my delaying my departure, is there?"

Before she had done speaking Penelope was at the door.

"Wait—wait!" he entreated; yet, except by a gesture of his half up-raised hand, making no attempt to detain her.

"I must first know where you are going and what you intend to do—since you appear unwilling to discuss any other part of the situation, I will only insist on that," he said. "Perhaps you have forgotten that legally I am your husband and have a right to know—am responsible, I fancy, for what becomes of you.

Moreover, it is my—privilege to provide for your future.”

For a moment she stared back at him, aghast ; then,

“How dare you !” she cried fiercely. “How dare you suggest liberty, and then insult me by presuming—Oh, as if the gift you’ve tossed back to me isn’t spoilt enough already to make it worse than useless !”

“For God’s sake, hear me out, and try to judge me at least as justly as I deserve.” He made an impulsive movement towards her, flinging out both hands with a gesture of remonstrance and entreaty. “If I’ve made a blunder—a ruinous blunder, you would call it—it was a very different one from what you accuse me of. It is you who——”

But before the last words had left his lips she was gone, and as the door shut with a sharp click behind her he turned from it, making his way back to his former place by the fire with disconsolate, dragging steps, his aspect that of a man who has suffered a disastrous defeat.

He had made no effort to detain her ; and now with a wearily patient air he placed his arm upon the chimney-piece and rested his forehead upon it, gazing down into the fire with an expression of anxiously intent listening.

She was in her own room, he told himself, and presently she would leave it and again pass by this door ; then he would waylay her, and put his case before her as she had not allowed him the time to do before. Without passing by she could not reach the hall door, and that was his chance.

But minute after minute went by, and still there was no sound of life from anywhere save the kitchen. It was evident that Harriet's preparations for supper were in progress, and the din which accompanied them seemed to the strained listener like pandemonium.

"Damn that row!" he muttered savagely.

How long had he been waiting?

Presently he went to the door, opened it and looked down the passage, only to discover to his unutterable amazement and consternation that the one facing him at the end of the passage, the one belonging to Penelope's room, was standing ajar.

Could she be still there, having forgotten to shut it? And should he investigate? Why not, for had he not a perfect right to, considering . . .

But Penelope was gone. Under cover of the noise made by Harriet she must have stolen along the passage and opened and shut the hall door unheard.

Where? A fierce, wild light blazed up suddenly in Dufferin's eyes—eyes whose retrospective gaze had momentarily glimpsed a vision of a light-coloured waistcoat and a straw hat, then kindled a fury of murderous jealousy against the rival who was so unfairly safeguarded by the lack of any adequate identification mark.

In one bound he reached the door and flung it open, but there his further pursuit was impeded. For, as he started forward on an impetuous dash in the direction of the stairs, a dark figure loomed up in front of him, obstructing the way.

"Who the ——!"

"What the ——!"

Marsham—for he it was, and not the light waistcoat and straw hat—choked back a laugh, then hastily straightened his features into an appropriately decorous expression.

He had been provided with a more courteous form of greeting than that which had involuntarily escaped in response to the one so savagely launched at him in the mutual surprise of this unexpected encounter. For the last day or so, indeed, he had spent much reflection on what his deportment should be when he first met his friend after his recent bereavement, and speculation as to the effect of a parent's funeral on the artistic temperament. Now he believed he knew, and when the spontaneous impulse to laugh had been brought under control, he felt a trifle taken aback.

Accordingly it was Dufferin who spoke first.

"Did you come up by the stairs?" he demanded fiercely.

"Certainly. The lift's not running; it's been out of order since——"

"Damn the lift! Did she pass you going down?"

"Did who pass? The lift?—and is it your latest fad to call it 'she?' and surely *she's* not your latest inspiration, too, by any chance? No, she was stationary, at the bottom, and I didn't meet a soul on the way up."

"Or in the hall?"

"There were several people down below, as far as I can recollect, but nobody I knew."

Dufferin made a vehement gesture of savage impatience.

"Then she's gone," he muttered, turning away.

"Who's gone? Hallo! what's up?"

"Nothing that's any concern of yours," came the gruff reply, as Dufferin plunged into the studio and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT impulse influenced her proceedings after leaving the flat Penelope could never accurately determine. Most of these were so entirely normal and commonplace, signifying nothing of the desperate resolve with which her will was playing hide-and-seek ; or of the utter indifference to what became of her, which was a really reliable and genuine factor in her frame of mind.

She was thoroughly convinced that she no longer wished to live nor cared what happened to her after she was dead. Nevertheless she put on her coat, hat, gloves, and outdoor shoes, gathered together a few necessities, packing them in a neat parcel as she had done preparatory to her former flight, and carefully stowed her purse, containing Marsham's unspent loan, in a handbag, which she then hung upon her wrist. All this was suggestive of a decision to brave an earthly future, but it did not occur to her to argue the matter. Life was not worth living—any more than death could now assume the aspect of a sublime sacrifice. The same ruthlessness which had devastated all life's sweetness had stolen death's recompense, had transformed it into a ghastly and ignoble, and yet the only, means of escape.

But it appeared that in spite of this, there were

several other practical, mundane matters which demanded consideration. First, there was a lodging to be found for the night—even if thoughts of physical comfort seemed incongruous among the crowded horrors of her brain. So she found the lodging—one at Hammersmith, in a house where an acquaintance of hers had once taken a room, and where she now paid a week's rent in advance because she lacked luggage as a guarantee of her integrity; and afterwards she wrote a letter to Bertie Lembridge, setting down a fairly authentic account of her misdeeds, mistakes, and misfortunes since last she had left him with his magnanimous, single-hearted promise echoing in her ears.

After finishing the letter, she asked herself why she had written it, and then shied away nervously from the answer. And when, a few minutes later, she dropped it into the pillar-box round the corner, she informed herself that she did not care whether he answered it or not—that no answer could make any sort of difference to one whose life was completely and irrevocably robbed of all hope and happiness.

Nevertheless, she must wait for an answer, and that reflection brought with it a strangely furtive sense of comfort and relief. To wait for that could not be cowardly procrastination; and when it came—if he came . . .

Bertie's offer and promise had been so unqualified and unmeasured, accordingly Bertie's hitherto untried powers must be unlimited, his hitherto unperceived attributes little short of omnipotent. In this faith, therefore, she would wait for him; and so she waited, striving to feel no relief at the tardiness of his acknow-

ledge of her message, yet mystified and filled with apprehension when four whole days passed by and he neither came nor wrote.

By five o'clock on the afternoon of the fourth day, Penelope began to feel she could not exist another hour without some variation from the monotonous occupation of watching from the window for the approach of postmen or of another figure whose non-appearance was gradually becoming less and less a source of amazement. So as a walk seemed the only form of variation that was available, she put on her outdoor things and ventured forth, directing her steps towards Ravenscourt Park as a place less congenial to her humour than the busy thoroughfares or dreary side streets.

After all, why should Bertie come? Why should he care? When this promise was made, things were quite different; but now he knew of the "ruinous blunder," and that knowledge most likely made her ultimate fate a matter of supreme indifference to him. Even if the news reached him that she was dead, he might feel no regret, since after receiving her letter he must realize that for months past she had been dead to him.

For more than an hour she loitered about, compelling herself to a feverish interest in everything that came within the range of her observation—cages of rabbits and doves, working-class mothers herding their large, shrill-voiced families—anything at all.

But it was the miniature lake that appealed to her most, so after a while she stationed herself on the bridge, with her gaze riveted on the water below. Nevertheless, she perceived no beauty in it; her eyes were blind to the reflections of evening sky and

tender green foliage : shift her thoughts what way she would, they obstinately returned to speculations as to the depth of the water beneath the bridge, while to her fancy the water itself became a living thing, a sinister yet fascinating siren ; in its faint ripple she could almost convince herself that she caught some sound of articulate speech.

" I'm here, ready for you. Your life's not endurable, and here I am. Try me ? It would be quite easy—only a matter of bracing your courage for a plunge, and then—nothing could ever trouble you more."

Shuddering with repulsion, and yet with an effort, because the fascination was so strong, Penelope withdrew her eyes and looked upwards. There she could see an orange sun, slowly dipping, lower and lower, towards the horizon of chimney-pots ; and its great flaming disk, glowing through a murky haze, seemed to smile a more inspiring message.

" Life is good," it beamed. " While it lasts there's hope, and hope always dies hard. In all the thousands of years since I've lighted your world, I've seen multitudes of people as unhappy as you, so I know. One cloudy day doesn't cast gloom over the earth for ever."

" But that's not what I *want* to think. I *don't* want to forget—I'm afraid of forgetting. What I want is to get away before I've time and the chance to forget," Penelope's tragic eyes made answer.

But although she would not agree with the sun's encouragement, she kept her gaze upon it until it at last sank completely out of sight.

As it disappeared the air seemed to grow suddenly

dank and chilly, and a thin mist rose and hung over the water.

Already the women and children were moving past her on their homeward way, so Penelope reluctantly resigned her post on the bridge and set forth for the Hammersmith exit, turning occasionally as she went to cast a wistful, farewell look at the fading glow in the western sky.

Hope always dies hard !

Even now, perhaps, Bertie was waiting for her.

By the time she reached her own gate it was nearly dark, and as she glanced up at the window of her room she perceived with amazement that there was a light within, a light that flickered and danced on the drawn blind.

Then Bertie *had* come ! And the foolish, officious, anxious creature had ordered a fire ; otherwise why would Mrs. Hawkins think of lighting one ?

But now that she knew he had come, was she really glad, did she really anticipate anything good from his coming ? Had she really any desire to meet him at all ? Did she actually intend to meet him or to turn and fly ?

That decision, at least, should belong to her.

But no ; apparently it did not. For even here, all alone, and free from the interference of any other human will, her liberty had again slipped away, and her question was already presenting itself to her in a different form. Could she, when her limbs were trembling so that she could scarcely move steadily, hope to escape ?

Whilst asking this, however, she was mechanically mounting the steps, and listening as she did so to a

man's tread, to the sound of a door handle being sharply turned.

No ; Bertie had heard her approach and was coming to meet her ; so she couldn't run away.

The hall was in darkness, but from the open doorway, and spreading as far as the opposite wall, a strip of reflected light stretched across the floor like a golden mat. After entering, it was on this that Penelope fixed her gaze, and as she surveyed it, a puzzled, incredulous look crept into her eyes.

Whose shadow was that ? Who was waiting for her ?

She shut the front door gently, and stood very still.

A shadow ! Was that all ? But was she dreaming when it seemed to her that the shadow was not the one belonging to the substance she had come to meet ? Was that a freak of her own fancy ? Quite probably, considering that a distorted shadow had for so long been her constant companion—a shadow bearing a strange likeness to this one, but—was that also fancy ?—without any substance behind it.

Nevertheless, as Penelope looked her lips parted in a smile, her eyes began to shine, and her soul was all at once warmed and illumined by a torch whose flame steepes both heaven and earth in the same effulgence, whose magic light reveals the one and transforms the other.

Only by a shadow had this torch been set alight—a shadow that in one second had routed and set to flight the hideous spectre of self-sacrifice—not a very recognizable shadow either, for the flickering firelight made it wobble and caper grotesquely.

So grotesque was it, that as she stepped into the

golden patch she laughed ; then, setting her foot on the wobbling thing which was the shadow's head, she realized that her hands were in the grip of those of the substance.

" Why did you send me to hell again—and when you knew quite well you didn't want to ? " the voice of the substance demanded, while its hands drew her across the path of light and through the doorway of the room beyond, one of them releasing her for an instant that it might shut the door behind them.

" But I've been there, too," she answered, and a sob mingled with her laughter, as she met the ardent gaze of a pair of blue eyes whose every shade of expression she had unconsciously learnt to know so well.

" Ah, then he was right ! " Dufferin exclaimed. " His inspiration wasn't astray ! "

With dazzled bewildered eyes Penelope looked up at him questioningly.

Who was he talking about ? Who was the wizard who had wrought this magic, who in one miraculous stroke had levelled the tantalizing, torturing barrier of constraint which separated them from heart's desire, who had levelled in a flash that which their obstinate folly had forced them to hide from each other so jealously ?

" Whose inspiration ? " she whispered.

" That of the well-wisher who pledged himself to ' help you at any time and in any way. ' "

" Bertie ! And you remembered that ? "

" For past ages hasn't that recollection poisoned all my nights and days ? "

Penelope cast a quick glance round the room, a

cloud of apprehension momentarily obscuring the glad light in her eyes. Already the exquisite feeling of unreality was passing away, and with the return of her reasoning powers fear and doubt reasserted themselves.

"Was it you who ordered the fire to be lit?" she asked sharply.

"It was I. Your well-wisher informed me that you hadn't any idea how to take care of yourself, and that I'd better lose no time about undertaking the job for you—in fact, that when left to yourself you lived in refrigerators and on crusts of stale bread—accordingly, as you weren't here I acted on his advice by starting to get the place warmed up. You see, I didn't know if you'd let me take you back to the studio."

"Is the choice left to me?"

"Certainly. I'm not going to drag you back against your will, when disagreeable associations may——"

"But there are none!" she interposed impetuously. "That's where I want to go—even if you told me that you were inspired to take me there!"

Dufferin accepted this assurance with a laugh that proclaimed his scorn and derision of all delusive inspirations.

"Then come at once," he said.

That evening they sat alone together by the studio fire, Marsham having discreetly vacated the flat, showing his discrimination, for in the magic land into

which Dufferin and Penelope's romantic fancy had transformed it, there was no place for him. Except for themselves it was unpopulated, unless when it seemed that Bertie's shadow strayed through it as if inspecting the marvel he had created, yet in which he could have no share.

"It was a very stuttering, indignant voice that informed me on the telephone, at about five o'clock this afternoon, of your whereabouts," Dufferin explained, in reply to Penelope's questioning. "And the stuttering voice informed me of quite a lot besides—of its private opinion of me, for one thing, and that it was induced to ring me up on account of a fear that, were its owner to confront me in person, he might yield to the temptation to break my skull. You wrote him a letter, it appears, and in it—apparently inadvertently—you mentioned my name, whereupon the intelligent owner of the voice looked me up in a directory, with the results I've already alluded to. He also added that I should have heard from him much sooner, had you not addressed the letter to the bank where he works, and where it remained until he retrieved it to-day after a week's sick leave on account of influenza. Only for that illness of his, our sojourn in hell might have been appreciably curtailed."

He paused, then resumed before she had time to offer any comment.

"And all that time I believed it was he who had robbed me of you," he said musingly, "and that I'd never even have the chance to make him pay the penalty, having no means of identifying him, except by a dimly-remembered glimpse of a light-coloured waistcoat and a straw hat. Your face is the only one

in that picture that memory can visualize—even now I've no notion what he is like."

But, for the present, at least, Penelope made no attempt to correct his misapprehension; indeed, she was not so very certain that he was altogether wrong, or that the nameless man had not actually exercised some telepathic influence on her imagination, in vengeance of her faithlessness to his memory. All her thoughts, for the time being, were bent on the man who owed her the least consideration and whose repayment of neglect was an act of sublime magnanimity.

"Little Bertie—little, generous-hearted Bertie!" She delivered this tribute of the absent benefactor's virtues in an awed whisper.

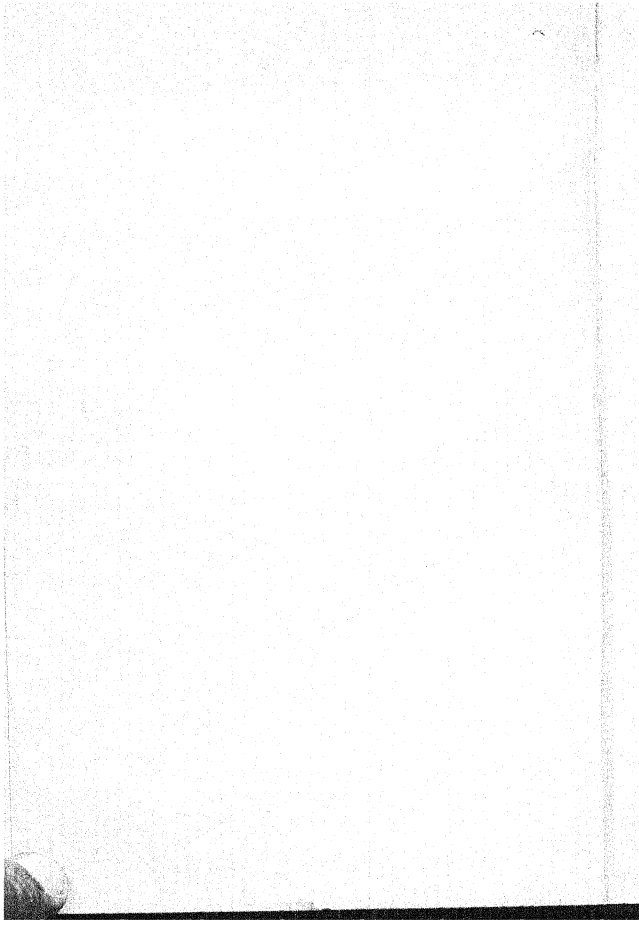
"Little!" Dufferin protested. "Why, notwithstanding his stuttering voice—indeed, it was the anguish in it that gave me the idea—I pictured him as a sort of Prometheus at the very least. It was even on the tip of my tongue to implore that he should pose as central figure in a masterpiece which the sound suggested—one that would show him distributing the heavenly gift among mortals."

"Don't! Please don't make fun of Bertie," Penelope entreated.

"I'm not. Little though his body may be, he has undoubtedly a vast soul. But tell me, what inspired you to write to him?"

"I suppose it *was* an inspiration," she admitted reluctantly. "And perhaps I really did know that he was capable of fulfilling his promise—the one which, you say, rankled in your mind for ages."

"Ah, then don't gibe at inspiration again," he advised her triumphantly. "As your confession proves, it's not all delusive, nor need it always penalize its slaves."



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